

1

Author: Gato

Illustrator: Itsuki Mito



Reincarnated as an

 **APPLE:**

This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever
Unblemished!



1

Author: Gato

Illustrator: Itsuki Mito



Reincarnated as an

 **APPLE:**

This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever
Unblemished!

1

Author: Gato
Illustrator: Itsuki Mito



Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter 1: Reincarnation

Chapter 2: The City of Kalabuya

A Brief Intermission: Holmer's Diary

Chapter 3: The Chasm of Catastrophe

Chapter 4: The Battle with the Queen

A Brief Intermission: Elumichai's Report

Chapter 5: Return

A Brief Intermission: Fresa's Nightly Thoughts

Epilogue

Extra: The Forbidden Short Story: In the Heavens, the
Melancholy of a Goddess

Afterword

Color Illustrations

Bonus Textless Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

“No way! A truck?” I exclaimed.

Right in front of my eyes, a truck skidded sideways and headed straight towards me. In the back were apples, ripped off their trees prematurely due to the harsh rain a few days ago—a mountain of apples that were meant to be discarded.

“Well, I’m done for...”

The truck flipped over and the apples fell, crushing me underneath. In an instant, I lost consciousness. Oddly enough, the sweet fragrance of apples lingered before slowly fading away.

The faint smell of apples tickled my nose. *Wait...that’s weird. I don’t feel like I’m breathing at all.*

“...tsu-san.”

I looked around and saw only vast emptiness, shining white and bright. *Where am I...?* I looked downwards and saw the ground was as white as silk. *I can’t even see my feet.*

“Furutsu-san,” said a woman’s voice.

“Ah, excuse me for my late introduction. My name is Daisuke Furutsu. I’m thirty-three years old, have no girlfriend, and am your ordinary businessman,” I said. “Heh, just kidding. I’m already dead, aren’t I?”

“I do apologize for what happened to you while I was away,” the woman replied.

“Ahhh, I knew it. Are you, by any chance, God?”

“I suppose so... Perhaps from your point of view, I would be God. I really do apologize...”

“Judging from how profusely you’re apologizing, I wasn’t supposed to die yet, but did anyway thanks to some kind of mix-up.”

“Correct. You died in the middle of your life. One of my subordinates, who oversees the life spans of your world, fell asleep on the job and you were crushed by a truck,” she confessed.

“Asleep! That’s no little mix-up! But I get the picture. So that means I can’t go back to my world and I’ll be reincarnated into a different one, right?”

“How did you know?”

“Heh heh, I’m actually quite the bookworm. I’ve read a lot of

those reincarnation novels recently. There are a lot of ways to die, but ‘getting hit by a truck’ is a classic. In fact, I’d feel pretty scammed if I couldn’t reincarnate after that!”

“I don’t quite follow what you’re saying, but I appreciate your quick understanding. You will indeed be reincarnated in another world.”

“Sweet! Come on, come on! What will my powers be? I’ll get something cool like an awesome skill or a special calamity-causing spell, right? Right?”

“I’m rather surprised you know that much.”

“Yup! I knew I’d get something OP! So what do I get? My death was a classic fastball right down the middle, so will my superpower be a cliché too? Or are you gonna throw me a curveball and give me something totally out of left field? Bring it on!”

She chuckled. “I’m glad you’re an optimistic person. In general, the base abilities of a reincarnated individual will be boosted, their potential will be strengthened, and they will receive a *Card of Fate*.”

“Ooh! A Card of Fate! Does that give me a special ability or something?”

“This time, however, seeing as your death is my responsibility, I will give you five Cards of Fate.”

“You sure are generous! Booyah! I’m gonna be so strong, with a whole bunch of abilities, and I’ll have my own harem and be suuuuper OP!”

“You must pick five out of one hundred facedown cards, and you must accept whatever fate you have chosen. Are we clear?”

“Wait, no do-overs? That’s a little scary, but I’ll probably be fine. I was lucky enough to get hit by a truck, after all. Today’s gotta be my lucky day!”

“You really are very positive... That’s rather unnerving. Um, are you really going to be all right? The cards you choose will determine your future. A good majority have useful powers, but some are quite the opposite. Please choose carefully so that you won’t have any regrets.”

“I choose this one, this one, this, this, and this!”

“How quick! You really don’t dawdle! Are you sure you wish to pick these?”

“Of course. In situations like these, you just gotta go in and grab the bull by the horns! I’m sure I picked some good cards, ’cause I’m amazing!”

“Well then, let’s check your abilities, shall we?” she said with a smile.

She flipped over the five cards, one by one.

“This first card is i-incredible! I’ve never seen this before!” the

woman stammered.

The card depicted a muscular man bending both arms and flexing his muscles.

“This is a ‘power’ card. Your strength, and your potential for growth and improvement, become limitless.”

“Woo-hoo! I picked a good one right off the bat! Hooray for muscles!” I cheered.

She flipped over the second card.

“N-No way! Your second card is also extremely rare! I can’t believe it!”

“Oho? I knew it, today’s my super lucky day.”

The second card had an image of an old woman with a staff.

“This is a ‘magician’ card. Any limits regarding magic have been removed for you. You will be able to learn any and all types of magic!”

“That’s crazy! I can go the magician route too? Hooray for magic!”

She gasped as she flipped over the third card. “I simply cannot believe my eyes. This is amazing! Y-Your third card is— What?!”

“Something good again? Heh, I rule!”

The third card was an angel peeking through the clouds, looking down at the world below.

“A ‘blessing’ card. With this card, no matter how much damage you sustain, you will always regenerate over time. Even if decapitated, you will survive.”

“Immortal? I’m gonna be some undying warrior? Oh man! Might as well pack it up now, right? I’ve already won!”

“I am not quite sure of what you’ve won, but you are indeed incredibly lucky! At this rate, I’m afraid of what the fourth card could be.”

She flipped over the fourth card.

“Ahhhh! Why? Why did you get this too?” she shrieked.

“What, a card that makes you scream? Let me see... Hm? The picture for this one is kind of boring, huh? Is that a box?”

“Th-This is a ‘storage’ card. You have access to a storage unit that holds an infinite number of items. As long as it isn’t alive, anything in this storage unit will never deteriorate.”

“Whoa! A storage card, huh?! You always need storage!”

“What’s more, this is an extremely rare card. There is only one of these cards in existence, and it can only be obtained if the previous owner relinquishes it or dies. There are normally only 100 Cards of Fate, but this is the special 101st. How lucky are you?”

“For real? That’s awesome! I can’t believe it’s that rare!”

“That’s not all. The card’s new owner also inherits every currently stored item. Any items inside this storage will now be yours!”

“Seriously? So if the previous owner was like a super amazing hero, there could be a legendary sword that can slay the demon king or something in there?”

“That certainly is possible.”

“I didn’t expect to be this OP already. I can just lay back, enjoy my harem, and be super successful like a certain izakaya pub in yet another world, can’t I?”

“Huh? I’m sure anything you desire will be possible.”

“I mean, it’s not like I want to start a pub or anything.”

“Now then, let’s flip over the last card, shall we?”

“Oh, that’s right! Heh heh, judging from how things are going, I bet my last ability will be insanely strong too. Let’s go! What do we have here?”

She flipped over the fifth card.

“Oh my!”

“Hm? What’s wrong? Uh, God, your card-holding hand is trembling.”

“Ah... How could this be?!” God’s shoulders trembled as a few tears sprang to her eyes.

“Did I pull something truly amazing? Man, I sure am lucky!”

“This is a ‘curse’ card. Anyone who chooses this card will, um, well, be reincarnated as whatever took their life.”

“Excuse me?”

“If you were to be killed by an animal, you would become that animal. If you were to fall from a high place to your death, you would become that place.”

“Okay. So if I get eaten by a tiger, I become a tiger. What’s ‘become a place’ mean, exactly?”

“If you fall from a building, you become a building like it. If you fall from a tall mountain, you are reincarnated as a tall mountain.”

“Whaaaaaat?! Hold on a second! Isn’t that a really bad card, then? Besides, what even happens when you ‘become’ a building?”

“If you are reincarnated into something that cannot move on its own, you will still retain your own consciousness, but you will remain immobile until you finally turn to dust.”



“Are you serious? I don’t want that! That means I’m gonna be a truck! No matter what powers I have, I’m not gonna be able to move unless someone drives me!”

“I have seen someone get reincarnated as a ship before,” she reassured me. “Though it took many years, they were finally able to move on their own one day. I’m sure you’d be able to do the same.”

“Wait, really? They must be incredible!” I pondered this for a bit. “Hey, God? Getting reincarnated as a truck is a bit much, don’t you think? If I was some sort of animal at least, I would think I’d find some kind of joy in living.”

“I’m very sorry, but as I said earlier, you must accept whatever fate you have chosen. From here on out, please carve your own future with your own two hands.”

“Well, guess there’s no helping it, then. Since I’m going to be reincarnated anyways, I might as well enjoy my new life—well, truck life!”

“You really are quite a positive person.”

“There’s no use crying over spilled milk.”

God chuckled. “Now, the gates to a new world shall open. For the first three days, you will still be able to converse with me, so I hope that puts your mind at ease. May your soul live a healthy life!”

As the words left her lips, my surroundings were enveloped in a warm, blinding light. *Yikes, that’s bright!*

I can’t see or hear anything. So this is how life will be from now on, huh? I’m totally stuck, just as expected. And anyway, can a truck seriously learn to move on its own?

“Furutsu-san, can you hear me? Furutsu-san?”

Hey, God! I can hear you.

“I’m glad you were able to reincarnate proper— Huh?!”

I guess I saw this coming, but I can’t move at all! I don’t have eyes either, so I don’t have any idea what’s going on around me. Well, trucks are made of steel, so I imagine I won’t break easily. But I guess if I was some fine-tuned machine, I might be pretty delicate.

“N-No, that’s not it! Furutsu-san, you’re...”

Hm? What’s not it? Anyway, man, it really is inconvenient to lose all five of your senses. Guess that’s par for the course when you’re a truck, though.

“F-Furutsu-san! You’re not a truck! You’re not a truck at all!”

Huh? I mean, I got hit by a truck, didn’t I? And so the “curse” card made me into—

“I’m telling you that’s wrong! You didn’t die from getting hit by a

truck!”

Huh?

“You’re an apple! You’re a picture-perfect bright red apple!”

WHAAAAAAAAAAT?!

Chapter 1: Reincarnation

In any case, the first thing I need to do is confirm my surroundings. I'm completely immobile and have zero sensory input right now. In my current pathetic state, it's probably better to ask God and have her tell me the situation from a third-person point of view.

So, God, what do you see?

"You're on a large tree, branches heavy with fruit."

I'm not even harvested yet?!

"It's ripe with apples, and you're one of those."

I didn't think I'd ever be referred to as "one of those."

"You and your many siblings are swaying in the breeze. It's quite soothing to look at."

I didn't think I'd have that many siblings either.

"You can only talk to me for three days. We should do as much as we can within that time."

Fair enough, but I still can't move.

"Out of all the inanimate things you could've reincarnated as, an apple isn't the worst option. After all, fruits are still living things."

Huh. Good point! That's kinda inspiring!

"Hee hee, that's much more like you, Furutsu-san," God said with a chuckle.

Okay then! I think I'll check the "storage" card and see if there's anything I can use in there. How do I do this?

"An excellent idea! There may be something that even an apple can use! Now, imagine the box that was illustrated on that card. Then imagine yourself peeking inside that box," God explained.

Ah, gotcha. Okay, let's see... I imagined myself peering inside the box. Whoa, this is amazing! Everything's just listed out in my head. Hmm, okay, so there's healing potions, money, jewels, food, and a sleeping bag.

"None of those seem necessary for an apple, though."

Yeah, you're right. Wait, what's this? It looks like a magic scroll... Whoa, and it even explains itself!

Magic Spell: Fireball

The reader of this scroll will learn how to use the spell, "Fireball."

Cost to use: 10 MP

Necessary attribute: Fire

Whoa, this is awesome! Fireball's a classic spell to learn in a different world! Okay, I want to test this out. God, how do I take this scroll out of the box?

"That's simple. Select the item you wish to withdraw, and a box should appear. Reach in, and you should be able to remove the item."

But I don't have any hands...

"Pardon?"

I'm an apple. No hands.

"Ah! That's right!"

Auuugh! I can't use this storage card at all! There's so many awesome items in there, but I can't take any of them out!

"P-Please, calm down for a moment. There must be a way..."

No, it's all over for me! I'm gonna spend the rest of my life dangling from this tree! My reincarnated OP harem story is over! I've got nothing left! Aaaaaagh!

"Hello, mister?" said a voice.

Nooooo! I might get harvested, or harassed by birds... Noooo! I don't wanna get eaten! Waaaaah!

"Mister, why are you crying?" the voice inquired.

Waaaaah! How can I not cry in this situation?! Wait, hold on... God, did you just ask me something?

"Pardon? Did you say something, Furutsu-san?" God replied.

Wait, that voice I just heard... Was that not you, God? It did sound kinda different. In fact, it was like I heard it in a completely different way. Who was that?

"Furutsu-san, I don't think anyone else can speak with you at the moment."

"Mister, is your name Furutsu-san? I'm the World Tree. It's nice to meet you."

The World Tree? Like the thing that shows up in video games all the time? What's it supposed to do again?

"The World Tree? You mean to tell me that you're able to hear the voice of the tree that supports the world itself?" God asked.

Yeah, pretty clearly, actually. Can you really not hear it, God?

"Not at all. Now this is a surprise! I never would have expected this!"

A voice that even God can't hear, huh? Is it because I'm also a plant now? Can plants talk to each other?

"Being able to speak with the tree is amazing!" she continued. "It essentially means you can speak with the world itself!"

The world itself? That does sound pretty epic.

"Sorry, I'm not this world's tree," the voice said.

Uh, God? The tree said it's not of this world.

God replied, “So it belongs to a different world? That’s odd. But if that’s the case, how can it speak with you?”

I can hear her voice so clearly, though. It sounds like she’s talking directly in my ear.

The tree giggled. “Hehe, I’m right here, you know? Over here, Furutsu!”

Whoa there, too loud! Don’t shout in my ear! I paused. Wait, my ear? But I’m an apple. It’s like she’s in my head and shouting at the top of her lungs. Oh, that’s it!

“Over here, mister! I’m over here!”

I knew it! The voice was booming in my head, coming straight from the storage card. I opened up the box and looked inside.

“Can you see me?”

Yup, I sure can! I had a feeling you were in here!

“Huh?! The World Tree was inside the storage?!” God exclaimed.



There's no doubt about it. This must be her, right?

"Gridarvol"

A staff made from a young branch of the World Tree.
Was created to defeat the evil Giants.

Attack (Physical): 5,660

Attack (Magical): 2,887,820

HP: Automatically regenerates

MP: Automatically regenerates

So the voice I heard is this staff made from the World Tree.

"Heh heh, you're an odd one. I've never met anyone that could talk with me. But...why are you dangling from that branch?" said the tree.

Ha ha, I'm not here because I want to be. I'm actually originally a human.

"A human? Really?" she asked.

Yep, cross my heart.

"Oh, wow!"

I reincarnated into this world, but you can see how I ended up. I can't move, see, hear, or do anything, really.

"Well, that makes sense. Our bodies are pretty different from those of animals."

Makes sense. But yeah, I can't move an inch, and I can't pull you out from that box. I'm in a bit of a bind here.

"Well, that's not good," she said after a pause. "Okay! How about I teach you how to move your body?"

"Please excuse me for a bit," said God. Apparently, she had to make a report to the "upper-level" entities. It seemed like the World Tree existing in the storage card was a bit of a problem.

"Okay then, let's start with how to move your body," the World Tree started to explain. She was willing to teach me how a plant moves around freely. "It's completely different from how animals move, so I suggest you forget what you already know."

You mean it's completely different from how I moved as a human?

"Um, you do know that some plants and trees grow towards the light, yes?"

Sure I do. Plants grow that way to have better access to sunlight, right? I think I've heard that sunflowers always face the sun.

"And if there isn't enough water or nutrients, some plants grow their roots out."

I know that too. They dig deeper so they can gather more.

“We plants live at a very slow pace. We’re slow, but we’re alive, just like any animal.”

Makes sense. Large trees can take tens or even hundreds of years to grow. They’re much slower than animals, but definitely still alive.

“And this is the important part. Both animals and plants are made up of a bunch of little balls.”

Wait, a bunch of little balls? I pondered for a bit. *Ah, you mean cells!*

“I guess animals use those little balls to move some way or another. There are definitely some plants that move too, but...” she trailed off.

A few that come to mind are the shameplant or the Venus flytrap, maybe. Some plants do move rather quickly, though it probably depends on a few factors. Fantasy settings usually have stuff like man-eating plants or trees with human faces. I wouldn’t want those to move too quickly.

“Plants and trees decide their movement based on the number of little balls. It takes a lot of time, but you can increase that number by growing more roots to the right, or spreading branches to the left, and so on.”

So you move by cell division. Does that mean I do too? This might take a while.

“No, normal plants live at a really slow pace, but you used to be a human, right, Furutsu? You can think as fast as an animal, so you can move as fast as one too. I think you can change how many little balls you have really quickly.”

I thought for a bit. *If I’m able to properly control the rate at which my cells increase or decrease, I should be able to move of my own accord then?*

“Yeah. I think you can!”

But I don’t have any of my senses. I can’t even begin to imagine how I can actually move.

“Hmm, then how about you try to feel your surroundings first?”

I can do that?! Please teach me, ma’am!

The Tree spoke with a dignified voice. “Hm, very well then! I shall explain!” She giggled before switching back to her normal tone. “Just kidding! Well, animals use their eyes and ears to see and hear, but plants don’t have those.”

Right. An apple only has a stem.

“Unlike animals, though, plants are very good at using every single one of those little balls to see and hear. So with practice, you should be able to see and hear much better than you did with your eyes and ears. But...”

But?

“This is completely different from how a human would sense

things. It's really hard and it's gonna take a lot of work."

Okay, I sorta get it. I'm so used to using my eyes to see, that I wouldn't even know where to start when I'm told to use my cells to sense the light... Huh?

"Is something the matter?"

Um, I just started to see these small red lights all around me. But there's no way I could, right?

After a brief silence, the Tree spoke. "Furutsu, you don't mean..."

What was that all about? I couldn't see anything at all before. Now I see some green stuff too. What is this? It feels so weird.

"You're amazing! Were you already able to say bye-bye to your animal instincts?"

Hm? What's so amazing about that?

"Can you count the number of small lights for me?"

Uh...huh. Yeah, I can actually. There's fifty-two.

"Ding ding ding! Including you, there's fifty-three!"

Are all these small red dots apples?

"Yep. There's actually fifty-five, but the trunk's in the way and blocking your view of the rest."

*It's blocking my view, but **you** can still see them? Anyways, this is surprising! How was I able to count so many dots in an instant?*

"That's because you don't need to use your eyes."

I don't need my eyes? I mulled over her statement for a bit. That makes sense! I can see all these red dots at the same time too. It's like I have 360-degree vision!

"Animals can't do this, right?"

Animals lose track of things once they're out of sight. They also have a lot of blind spots. It's impossible to keep track of so many things without marking them somehow. I'm a plant now, though! Simply put, I can see all these things at once, so I can count them all in an instant. Being a plant sure is convenient!

The Tree giggled. "Exactly! With more practice, you'll be able to see your surroundings much more clearly. I also think you'll be able to hear. It's a lot easier than seeing."

I think I'm getting the hang of this. I just have to be conscious of the fact that I'm a living thing composed of a bunch of little balls. I started to feel the slight breeze, as the wind passed soft vibrations through my skin.

"Each and every one of those balls feels the swaying of the wind and relays the sounds to you. That vibration that you feel is sound."

I took some time to take it all in. This is the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. I'm starting to hear the sound of water too. I focused my senses. And there's a little river! I can even clearly see the fish jumping!

"You're amazing! You've already got it down, Furutsu!" the Tree

exclaimed.

It's because I've got an amazing teacher. Thank you.

"Ha ha, you're welcome!"

Once I'd gotten the hang of it, I was almost puzzled as to why I couldn't do this earlier. It was so simple.

This is a lot more convenient than when I was a human! I can see in every direction, and I can hear sounds from a lot farther away. For example, I can clearly hear the screams over there. I paused. *Huh?*

"Noooo! Someone! Please help me!" a person shrieked.

"Heh heh. Tasty, tasty human! Looks so yummy!" said a different voice.

A woman was being chased by a little green man.

She was out of breath. "Phew... D-Don't come any closer! Get away from meee!"

"Not gonna eat you. So stop! Tasty-looking human, stop running! Okay?" the man responded.

Yeah, this fits the bill.

"Is that woman being chased?" asked the Tree.

Seems like it. A pretty cliché situation too. Wait, hold on a sec here! Isn't this a bit too soon for me? I can't even move yet.

"Someone! Anyone!" the woman screamed, her voice sounding closer.

A voice cackled with delight behind her. "Heh heh! You done for! So just give up?" He sounded like a stereotypical anime punk, the type that's a complete yes-man to their bosses.

The woman started to cross the bridge over the small river.

She's coming over here. All right, let's do this!

"Furutsu, you don't mean..." the Tree started.

Yeah, I've got to help her!

"What?! It's dangerous! You don't even know how to move!"

Well, it's now or never. I've got to do something. If only they came under my branch, I could fall down and try to tackle him or something. As long as that little green guy pays attention to me, I can buy some time.

"Furutsu..."

So could you teach me how to cut off this stem? I can sort of imagine it, but I don't know exactly what to do.

"Um, I think you're on the right track. There's a wall of little balls between you and your mother. Can you feel that?"

My mother? Oh, right, this tree gave birth to me in this world. To think I'd leave the nest on my first day here... The world's a tough place.

"Noooo! Please! Stay away!" the woman shrieked.

"You're delicious! Haven't eaten you yet, but you look so yummy! You gotta be delicious!" the man yelled.

I don't really get what that guy's saying, but the woman's definitely in

trouble. I should hurry. Uhhh, you said there was a wall of little balls, right? Which means there's a boundary of cells between myself and my mother... Yeah, I can tell. I can't control anything past this point, so it must be here.

"You're amazing! Were you really a human before?"

Oh my God, he's gonna kill her! That bastard! Gotta move fast then. Okay, what do I do with this boundary?

"Let go of every little ball that connects the two of you."

Do I try to cut off every cell that binds us together? I tested it out. I was right! I can do this!

"Nooo! I can't..." the woman screamed.

"Heh! Ha! Hah!" the man cackled. "That's right! This the end!"

Okay, good, just run towards this tree. Come on, get right below me!

"Furutsu, be careful, okay? I believe in you!" the Tree said.

Thanks! Okay, right this way!

I felt like a mecha pilot. 3...2...1... Furutsu, launching!

"Noooo! Stooooop!" the woman shouted.

"Heh! I caught y— Ow!"

Ouch! G-Good, I was able to hit that green guy! Huh, I don't feel pain, exactly, but I have this awful feeling around the spot I landed on. Is this the apple equivalent?

"Owww! Damn, what was that? What happened?!" the man yelled as he rubbed his head. He glanced around to check his surroundings.

I knew it, that didn't do much. But hey, at least the woman was able to run— Whoa there!

In front of her were two other little green men.

"Ah..." the woman stammered. "Th-There's two more of those goblins?!"

Yeah, I thought those were goblins too. Good, I can stop calling them little green men.

"Eek!"

Wait, no, not good. This is pretty bad, actually. That woman's gonna get eaten!

"Furutsu, there's nothing you can do! You can't take on three of those tough-looking goblins!" the Tree said.

That may be so, but I still have to try! Increase, my cells! Move! Move! Move! I started to feel the ground shift under me. Good! Prepare yourselves, goblins! Raaaaah!

"What? That apple, moving on its own. Why?" one of the goblins asked.

I felt myself rolling and rolling and rolling...

Whaaaaat?! I'm dividing my cells as hard as I can here! I can only roll around a little?

"Wait, the thing that hit my head..." the goblin muttered. "Was it

the apple?"

Crap! I just made myself a target!

"Step on it! Splat! Hey, quit rollin' around!" The goblin chased after me.

Roll Roll Roll...

Ack! I may not get dizzy, but I don't know what else an apple is supposed to do!

Roll Roll Roll...

"You damn apple! Stop rolling!"

Hey, I'm with you there!

"What you doing? We should eat her," another goblin called out.

"No! Let go! I-I-I taste horrible!" the woman cried.

Darnn, the other goblins already caught her!

"Right! We eat her, then apple," the goblin replied.

Stop treating me like a dessert! But what do I do? I only know how to roll!

"Here, your prey. You go first," one of the goblins said.

Oh, they share? Wait, now's not the time to be impressed.

"Heh heh, I'll bite head."

"Waaaaah?!"

Roll Roll Roll!

Raaaaagh! Stop that! Quit it!

Roll Roll Roll Roll!

Aaaaaahhh! Get your dirty hands off of her!

Roll Roll Roll Roll Roll!

Damn it! Is rolling the only thing I can do?!

Just then, I heard the ding of an alarm as a monotonic voice said, "Confirmed the activation of non-muscle-based unknown power source. This will be linked to your power card."

An unknown power? Linked? Who said that?

I heard another ding and the monotonic voice echoed through my head once more. "Movement using cell division has been placed under your power card. Your limits have been removed and you will receive the greatest growth adjustment possible."

This voice is coming from the Cards of Fate!

A celebratory fanfare played. "Congratulations. You will receive certain bonuses from discovering a new ability. Please be mindful of your rapidly increasing strength."

Bonuses? Whoa! My body immediately felt lighter as every cell was rapidly increasing in power. This is amazing! This must be the effect of the power card!

"Furutsu, the little balls you control are gaining a lot of power," the Tree said, surprised.

Booyah! I feel the power flowing through me! I'll use this to tackle

those goblins and take 'em out in an instant! Let's goooooo!

Boom!

H-Huh? What happened? I heard a strange sound, felt some kind of impact, and all of a sudden the view was totally different. Where am I? Where are the goblins?

“Furutsu! Below you! Below you!” the Tree shouted.

Below me? Whoa! What happened?!

“You jumped towards the goblins!”

I know. I tried to tackle them.

She chuckled. “You jumped a bit too high for that, don't you think?”

Yeah, guess so. I do feel sky-high right now.

“You did it! That's a big win for you!”

I saw the body of a goblin on the ground below, its torso completely gone.

“The tree—your mom—looks so small from up here! That's amazing!”

Yeah, I'm super OP.

I glanced down again and saw the woman sitting on the ground as the two goblins ran off. Thank goodness. I'm glad I was able to save her. All I have to do is land now.

I then heard God's voice. “I apologize for the wait. I just returned from— Furutsu-san?!”

Oh, welcome back, God.

“What's going on? Why are you in the air? Were you plucked away by a bird?!”

Nah, I just saved someone. Y'know, it's one of those classic situations that happen when you reincarnate.

“You say such odd things sometimes.”

Whoops, give me a sec, God. I have to stick the landing. If I don't, I might break into a million little pieces. I need to use...not my legs. I'll increase the number of cells in my outer layer and thicken my skin. When I'm about to land, I'll just use my willpower and force my way through.

The Tree laughed. “You didn't really think about that last bit, did you?”

Yup! Sometimes, you just gotta do it! All right, I'm gonna land!

Raaaaaah!

Boom!

Ugh...ow, I guess I jumped a little too high. Uh, I don't feel any cracks! Woohoo! I did it! See? Told you I could!

The Tree replied, “You're right! That was amazing!”

Yup! Ha ha ha! Uh, anyways, is that woman okay?

“Furutsu-san, who in the world is that woman? And what is that corpse?” God asked.

Oh, that's the goblin. He was chasing that woman around.

"Did you save her? How? You're an apple!"

The woman seems to be fine, just knocked out. I mean, a green dude exploded right in front of her eyes. I'd be surprised if I were her too. I should wait here until she regains consciousness. The goblins might come back too.

"Furutsu-san! Furutsu-san!" God yelled.

Heh, am I being gentlemanly here or what? I'm even standing guard for her. Oh, sorry, what was that, God?

"Jeez! What's going on?! Tell me what happened!"

Okay. Well, thanks to the World Tree, I'm able to see my surroundings and move around. I can also hear sounds now.

"You learned that much while I was gone? That's impossible..."

Look! See me roll! I demonstrated.

"What?! Gross!" God shrieked.

Huh? What was that? Did you say something?

"Uh, nothing! H-How did you learn how to move in such a short amount of time?! You even managed to defeat monsters."

Aren't I the best? I may be the strongest apple ever.

"Is that really a contest?"

In any case, it was good I had the power card on me. I would've been toast without it!

"Furutsu-san, since you don't have any muscles, I don't think the power card would apply to you."

Huh? But I heard this dingy sound, and then I got stronger. I even got a bonus for discovering a new ability.

God chuckled. "Oh, don't be ridiculous. I've never heard of the Cards of Fate applying any bonuses."

Wait, really? Guess I misheard it then.

"Oh, also, about the World Tree, Gridarvol..."

"What about me?" Gridarvol asked.

What is it? Is something wrong with the World Tree?

"Um, I can't hear her voice, but she can hear me, correct?" God asked.

"Yup! I can hear her!" Gridarvol said.

She said she can hear you.

"Excellent. Then I want you both to listen carefully," God said.

"Okaaaaay!"

What's wrong?

"For every world out there, there is a single World Tree that supports it. Each World Tree is necessary in maintaining its own world," she explained.

"I see," Gridarvol said.

I didn't know that. Wait... Don't tell me that the world Gridarvol is

from is crumbling because she's been uprooted.

"No, the entity we call 'Gridarvol' is merely a branch of the World Tree. She's like a fractional spirit that was divided from the main soul. The actual tree is still present in that world. But..."

"But?"

But what?

"It is apparently quite dangerous for multiple World Trees to exist in one world. It might affect the integrity of the world itself," said God.

"Wow, I didn't know that!"

I guess it's like having two drivers for a single car. That's super dangerous! I wouldn't want to go through that again!

"I'm going to ignore that comment," God replied after a small pause. "As I was saying, it would not pose a problem if Gridarvol were used as a staff in her own world. She's part of the same World Tree, after all. Multiple branches from the same tree can exist."

I see.

"The problem arises when there are multiple distinct World Trees in one world. So long as she stays in the storage card, all will be well. However, if by some chance, she comes out and spreads her roots here..."

"What happens then?" Gridarvol asked.

The suspense is killing me. Wh-What comes next?

"This world will implode and disappear without a trace. Everything will return to zero. It might even affect other neighboring worlds as well."

That's awful! That's absolutely terrifying!

"Th-The world might get destroyed because of me?" Gridarvol muttered.

"As such, the higher ranks have suggested destroying Gridarvol..." God said.

Gridarvol shrieked.

Hold up! God, isn't that going a bit too far?! This girl was made into a staff and kept inside this cramped—well, actually, it's not that bad, right?

"There's unlimited space here," she replied happily.

Correction! She was shoved into this limitless storage, which must've been lonely for her, and was then taken to a different world! She was treated unfairly, and now you're ordering me to destroy her because she seems dangerous? Is that what a god does?!

"Furutsu..." Gridarvol murmured.

"Furutsu-san, you are truly a kind person," God said.

Come on, please! I don't care what happens to me, but just save her! Please! I'm begging you! I'd prostrate myself if I could!

"Furutsu..." Gridarvol whimpered.

How about this? Can we return her back to her world? She can spread her roots there, right?

“Furutsu-san, the only way for items to go to different worlds is for a reincarnator such as yourself to choose the storage card in their world. Even if someone does happen to select the card, we won’t even know if they’re going to Gridarvol’s home world. The probability of that occurring is astronomically low.”

Come on! Then what’ll happen to her?

“You don’t need to worry about it. Thank you, Furutsu,” Gridarvol said.

Don’t say that! Don’t give up! This is so...so...

“Furutsu-san, it will be fine. Listen to the rest of my story,” God said.

What do you mean by “fine?!” At this rate, this girl’s going to...!

“The higher-ups did indeed suggest destroying the World Tree, but I was able to postpone that plan for now,” God explained.

Huh?

“I told them that the owner of the storage card is an apple.”

“Oh!” Gridarvol and I exclaimed together.

That’s right! Ha ha, of course! I’m an apple! It’s not like I could take her out of storage!

“Yes, so there’s no need to worry yourselves. Gridarvol will not be destroyed. As long as you’re unable to take things out freely, the higher-ups won’t do anything.”

Ahh, I’m so glad! I’m so wonderfully glad!

“Yeah, thank you, Furutsu!” Gridarvol shouted.

“That’s why you shouldn’t stand out so much. Such as, say, by moving autonomously or slaying monsters,” God added.

“Oh,” Gridarvol and I muttered.

Well, that’s not good. Since I’m able to move around freely now, there’s a slight possibility that I would be able to take things out of the storage. If the gods find out...the World Tree would be in danger.

“Ahem, Furutsu-san?” God said.

Y-Yes?!

“I understand that you can now roll around freely.”

Y-Yeah. You’re right. Yeah.

“However, that’s all you can do. I haven’t seen you do anything else, nor have I heard of anything of the sort.”

R-Right! That’s right! I can barely roll, even! I’m just an apple, right?!

“You haven’t done anything to that woman over there, or to that dead monster. Is that correct?”

Huh? Oh, yeah, right! That’s right! I wonder what happened over there!

“So for a few more days, I’ll be watching over you, but you’re just

an apple. A normal apple with no other powers. All you can do is roll, and nothing else, correct?"

Oh yeah, for sure! B-But is that okay with you? You're a god and all...

God chuckled. "Do you remember why my subordinates accidentally let you die?"

Of course I do. There's no way I could forget! It definitely left a lasting impression on me. It's because they fell asleep—oh! I get it!

"Wait, what? I don't," Gridarvol said.

Uh, well, gods can get tired, sleepy, or distracted too. It could mean that God isn't constantly watching over all of us.

"I'll refrain from commenting on that statement," God said. After a brief silence, she spoke in a softer, more monotonic voice. "I think I shall muse aloud for a brief while."

Okay. I won't eavesdrop.

"Gods oversee not only humans, but all living animals. As such, we clearly don't have enough personnel. Furthermore, the fates of animals that are below a certain soul rank, as well as those of plants, are all pushed upon the World Tree."

I see. Makes sense.

"So in this vast world, there isn't a god that would specifically watch over 'an apple with free will' or 'a branch that can't come out of storage,' should they even exist at all."

"Uh, Furutsu, is she talking about—?"

Ahem ahem ahem! La la la! I can't hear you! I can't hear you! World Tree, God's talking to herself right now. Do you understand?

"Huh? Oh...right! Yeah! I-I can't hear anything!" she stammered.

Good girl.

"We especially don't pay attention to plants and the like. As long as said plant doesn't stand out too much or do anything egregious like, say, destroy multiple worlds, they should escape our notice," God said.

In other words, God's putting her trust in us.

"Thank you, God!" Gridarvol said.

Thank you, God.

God laughed again. "I hear all sorts of odd voices today. I wonder if it's just my imagination."

All right, World Tree! We should do our best! We can't make any problems for God!

"Right! But what should I do?" the Tree asked.

Well, we should be fine for now, since I still can't take you out of the box. But one day, I'd like to, and I'd like to use other things that are in there too.

"But if you take me out, the world would be in danger."

All right, then I've decided! World Tree, we'll find a way to safely take

you outside!

“Huh?! Can you do that?”

No idea!

“Why do you sound so confident?!”

I really have no idea. But if an apple like me can move around on my own, a whole lot of miracles could happen in this world.

“Ha ha, you’re right! You’re so right! I want to go outside! And I want to go on a bunch of adventures with you!”

All right! Then let’s do it! Leave it to me!

“Since you all seem to be talking to yourselves, I do have one more thing I’d like to ponder aloud,” God said.

Hm? What is it? I’m not listening at all. Spit it out, God!

“Perhaps the World Tree of this world might be able to help.”

“The one for this world?” Gridarvol asked.

Huh, right. We can just talk about World Tree matters with the World Tree. Thanks, God! I mean, thanks for thinking out loud!

“Of course. Good luck, Furutsu-san. That will be all from me for now,” God replied.

Thanks! I’ll do my best! That’s it from me too! I paused for a bit. Hey, World Tree, I’ve been thinking...

“Is something wrong?” Gridarvol replied.

Is there something else I could call you by, other than “you” or “World Tree”?

“I have the name given to me when I was a staff.”

Gridarvol, right? It sounds like I’m treating you like a thing. I don’t like it.

“You’re a kind person, Furutsu.”

Ha ha, you think? I just don’t really like it much, is all. Hmm... How about I call you ‘Grida’ instead? I just shortened it a little.

“Grida? I like it! I’d really like that! It sounds so cute!”

All right! Grida it is! Hope we can get along!

Clack.

“Sure! Thank you, Furutsu!”

Clack.

Hm? Did you hear something weird just now?

“I did. What was that?” Grida replied.

I don’t know. There’s nothing around here. It sounded metallic, but I don’t see anything like that.

“Furutsu-san, Furutsu-san, look!” God piped in.

Is something wrong, God?

“The woman that you have nothing to do with—who you absolutely did not save—is waking up!”

You’re right! I’ve never seen that woman in my life! I don’t know why she was unconscious, but she’s glancing around at her surroundings now.

Grida giggled. "You two are so funny! We don't know her, then?"

That's right. Why are you laughing, Grida? She's a stranger. Nothing funny about that.

"Ha ha, right, of course! But Furutsu, she's trying to grab you!"

Well, I do look delicious. Anyone would want to pick me up. Wait! Stop! Ahhhh! Why is she picking me up?!

"Probably because you look so delicious, right?"

Chapter 2: The City of Kalabuya

It took us three days to reach the city of Kalabuya.

This means that I must bid farewell to you today, God.

“That’s right. We will cut off our communication soon. From here on out, you have to live on your own,” God replied.

Yeah. Thanks for everything. It’ll get a bit lonely, but I have a friend I can rely on, so I think I’ll be fine!

“I’m a friend you can rely on? Hee hee, that makes me so happy!” said Grida.

“That’s right, you’re not alone. I won’t be able to do anything for you two from now on, but I’ll always be watching over you,” said God.

Okay! Stay tuned, because we’re gonna make a big impact in this world!

“I’m sure you will. I wish you the best of luck!”

“Thank you for everything, God!” Grida called out.

Thanks for everything, God! Grida and I are both very grateful to you!

So? What the heck is going on?

“I awakened somethiiiiing!” said the woman.

No, you didn’t. Also, wake up yourself and face reality!

“I thought I was going to get eaten by the gobliin! Just then, my magic activated!”

Notice anything weird? That’s right, this was the voice of the woman that I saved from the goblin.

“The great magician Fresa-chan’s apple magic saves the daaay!” she said with a drawl. She seemed to hang onto the end of every sentence like that. Her name, apparently, is Fresa-chan, a self-proclaimed “Apple Magician.”

“I must have summoned this apple out of nowhere, and it defeated the goblin in one blooow!”

That kind of magic doesn’t exist. The goblin was defeated because I got power-ups and rammed into it—a physical attack. She also thought she summoned me, but if she would have looked up, she would have seen my fifty-four other siblings dangling from a tree.

“It was so sudden! An apple, out of nowhere! I must have summoned it!”

It seemed like she didn't even notice the apple tree. She was misunderstanding the entire thing.

"This magic must activate when I'm in trouble! As proof, after the goblin was defeated, this apple only activated one other time on my way heeere!"

After she picked me up, she didn't eat me and instead carefully stored me until she reached this city.

"Don't freak out. Just listen, okaaaay?" Fresa continued. "Yesterday, I bumped into Sedel, the infamous, giant, human-eating ant!"

Oh, was that an ant? I thought it was a praying mantis or something, what with those super long legs. It was huge too.

"Wait, Fresa! You mean that absolute monster they tagged as B-class? I'm surprised you came back alive!" exclaimed an armored man with a black mustache, who was across from her.

I think his name was...

"Ha ha, that's when my apple magic activated, Holmer-saaan!" Fresa replied with a smile.

Right, Holmer.

She continued. "Sedel ran right at me, kicking up all this dust. I thought I was a goner! Just then, this apple left my hand and started rolling on the ground."

Yeah, I didn't think I'd have to move around that much in front of God.

"In the next instant, it moved faster than any spell I'd ever seen, and blew Sedel's head into tiny little pieces!"

That bug's outer shell was tough, and I even cracked a little. Luckily, by sheer coincidence and a spot of good fortune, God just so happened to be looking away. Could have been worse.

"Tee hee, God really is nice, isn't she?" Grida said.

You're misunderstanding me, Grida. God really was looking away just as I attacked, and I was just lucky that she didn't see anything.

"Okay, I think I see what you're saying. You just slipped and fell and happened to land on that monster, right?" she said.

See, you get me! I knew you'd understand. Anyways, that's why Fresa-chan thinks that I'm part of her apple magic or something.

"Hmph, it sounds like a tall tale to me. No one but you has seen your apple magic, right? You don't have any proof," Holmer said.

"Heh heh. I thought you'd say that! Feast your eyes on this!" Fresa confidently drawled, as she raised me in the air. "Come on out!"

Aw, jeez... Grida, will you do the honors?

"Okey dokey!" she replied.

Suddenly, the corpse of a large insect appeared in front of Fresa-chan.

“Th-This is...” Holmer stammered.

That’s right, it’s Sedel.

To take the previous owner’s items out of the storage card, I’d need my own arms. Seeing as I don’t have any, I can’t lay a hand on any of it, literally.

Holmer couldn’t hide his shock. “A whole corpse came out of that apple!”

“Now do you believe meee? This is my apple magic!” Fresa said triumphantly.

Wrong. This is my storage card’s ability.

God was surprised by this too, but it seems that the storage card evolved and adjusted to me. I’m now able to remove items without using my hands—indirectly, at least.

Thanks, Grida.

“Of course! You’re welcome!”

In an odd turn of events, Grida’s now able to add or remove items to the storage. I’m no longer the one managing it. God said that it could be due to my special circumstances—the cards are adjusting themselves for me.

In other words, Grida is now irreplaceable to me.

“Aww, Furutsu! That’s such a bold thing to say!”

Huh? You seem pretty happy for some reason.

“Hey! You know why! You’re such a meanie!”

Uh, no, I don’t really know why. Let’s leave it at that.

Anyways, I can’t take any of the previous owner’s stuff out, including Grida herself, but we can freely remove anything Grida stores. Also, the power card adjusting to my cell division was apparently rare itself. The Cards of Fate might have some special abilities that even God isn’t aware of.

“Sooo? Holmer-san, I beat this myself, you knooow?” said Fresa.

“Hmmm, so you’re not lying. You really defeated this monster with that apple?” Holmer asked.

Oh, sounds like apple magic will become an actual thing.

“Fine. As promised, I’ll permit you to enter the Adventurers’ Guild. Provided, of course, you pass the entrance test.”

“Yaaay! I’m gonna be an adventurer!” she cheered.

“If you pass the test, I said! It starts at sunrise tomorrow. Don’t be late!”

An Adventurers’ Guild, huh. I expected no less as a reincarnator. We’re hitting all the classic tropes! But will Fresa-chan be okay? This apple magic of hers isn’t real, after all...

Fresa-chan brought us to lodgings a ways from the city. It seemed

she was using this place as her base while she practiced her magic to become an adventurer.

“Furutsu, why do you call her ‘-chan?’” Grida suddenly asked.

Huh, good question. That’s what she calls herself, so I guess I just followed suit.

“Then could you stop?”

Hm? Why?

“I just don’t like it.”

A little weird, but okay. If you don’t like it, I’ll stop.

Fresa carefully placed me on a bookcase shelf and started to pack.

“All right! Tomorrow, I’ll do my best!” she said. She started stuffing her backpack with medicine and portable food, probably for her test tomorrow.

It turned out that she was shadowing a group of adventurers as an apprentice. That’s why she was so far out from the city, and ended up getting chased around by goblins. She wasn’t there to fight, but to do all the menial work.

“Jeez! I was just about to diiiiie thanks to them,” she sighed.

She was kicked out in the middle of their journey, and was forced to walk back to the city by herself. On her way back, she bumped into those goblins.

She claims that it wasn’t her fault, but maybe she made a fatal mistake and the party chased her out for it.

“Um, Furutsu, what should we do from now on?” Grida asked.

Well, we need to meet the World Tree, and find a way to properly get you out of that storage card.

“Right, because the world might get destroyed if I come out wrong.”

That means we don’t really have to tag along on Fresa’s test. We can sneak out if we want.

“Heh heh! Yay! Hooray! An adventurer!” Fresa exclaimed in a singsongy voice as she started polishing her lantern. She was humming to herself.

Well, it’s probably less suspicious to be with her than to roll around as an apple. I guess I can pretend to be a magic apple for a bit, I said after a brief silence.

“You really are kind, Furutsu,” said Grida.

What are you talking about? I’m just gonna use her. That’s all.

She giggled. “Right. You’re an evil apple, rotten to the core, and you won’t even shed a tear.”

You seem kind of happy about that. You’re right, that’s exactly what I am. I’m a cold, rotten apple that won’t shed a single tear. Well, whether I’m evil or not, I can’t exactly cry as an apple anyways.

“Oh nooo! I was about to forget my grimoire. Where is it?” said

Fresa. She had finished packing and was going through a different bag.

Hm? Is she gonna do it again today?

“Even if I have my apple magic, I should still be able to use some speeells.” Fresa took out a thick, tattered grimoire. It seemed her daily routine was to practice her magic from the book before she went to bed.

“Uh, let’s seeee,” she said, as she thumbed through the pages and found the page she had marked. She started to chant: “Unknown traveler, remove the shackles of fire. Unleash the unseen, and return to ashes within the earth.” She repeated the spell over and over again.

“Fresa-san’s been at it every day,” Grida said.

Yeah. Thanks to her, I’ve already memorized the spell myself.

“Ha ha, me too!”

After practicing for about an hour, Fresa shut her grimoire and started mumbling to herself. “Phew. Unknown traveler...unleash... All right then!” She opened a window and stuck both her arms outside.

“Unknown traveler, remove the shackles of fire. Unleash the unseen, and return to ashes within the earth. Fire magic!” she chanted.

Beads of red light started to gather on Fresa’s outstretched hands. Then...sizzle. A bit of smoke puffed out from her hands and the red light disappeared.

“Whaaat? Why can’t I do iiit?” Fresa wailed.

She failed again.

“Today was a bust too,” said Grida.

Yeah. I commend her for trying every day without giving up.

“Fine! I can use apple magic anyways! I’ll learn how to use other spells soon!” Fresa said, teary-eyed. She puffed out her cheeks and shut the windows before starting to take her top off.

“Hey! Fresa-san’s going to strip in front of you again!” Grida yelled.

So what? I’m just an apple.

“Hmph! Stop ogling her like that! You pervert! Cheater!”

Ogle? I don’t even have eyes. Wait, how am I a cheater?

Grida huffed in response.

Okay, okay. I don’t get it, but you want me to cut off my vision for now, right? It’s not like I want to look either, okay?

“Liar! I know guys! They’re all lecherous perverts and beasts!”

Hey, I’m no beast. I’m a fruit. Besides, I don’t bother with stuff like peeping. If I wanted to look, I’d just ask her directly.



“You sure are amazing,” Grida said after a bit.

Amazing? No way! No one's ever been okay with that approach!

Anyways, is Fresa done? Can I look now?

“Aha ha, I feel a bit silly for worrying so much.”

You're so weird.

“Oh, Furutsu, she's been done for a while now. She's already asleep.”

For real? Now I'm the one that feels silly for worrying! I enabled my vision again. Hey, look, she's actually not.

“Huh? Oh, you're right!”

Looks like she can't sleep at all, as a matter of fact. She keeps tossing and turning... Wait, are her eyes open? Is she even going to try?

“Furutsu, she's scaring me...” Grida whimpered.

She's scaring me too. She's got those big open fish eyes right now. Does she want to become an adventurer that badly? She should rest for her big day tomorrow. This isn't gonna be good.

As the sun was rising the next morning, we found a bunch of people gathered in front of the guild building.

“I-I'm so sorry for being laaaate!” Fresa puffed.

See, what did I tell you? Why did I have to wake you up anyways? What am I, your mom?

“I'll subtract three points from your score for tardiness. You're Fresa the magician, correct?” the proctor said. “Stay there and listen to the rest of my explanation.”

You even got points deducted already. No time to be down—listen to the instructions.

“Now then, we'll begin the entrance exam for the Adventurers' Guild. I'm sure you're aware, but this exam consists of three sections: melee combat, long-distance support, and a trial adventure.”

Huh. So it's not like a sword and sorcery type of thing.

“You can score a maximum of 140 points for each section. If you score at least a 40 in each section, and have a combined score of 200 or more, you pass the exam.”

140? That's kind of weird. Why didn't they just make it an even 100 or something?

“In addition, Fresa, the only applicant that was tardy, will have one point deducted from each section.”

I can hear everyone cracking up, but the girl in question's too nervous to care. Will she be okay? She needs 40 points for each area too. That means she can't just go all in on a portion of the exam that she's confident in.

“All right, we’ll begin with the melee combat test. Everyone, follow me.”

“Next up, Fresa! Come to the center!” the proctor barked.

“Y-Yes siiir!” Fresa stammered.

So these are the underground training fields inside the guild building. It’s so roomy in here.

“The proctor you’ll be facing is Lananas. The three of us will grade each applicant, and don’t come crying to us about your scores later.”

The three proctors present rotated amongst themselves, testing each applicant with a mock battle. Magic and projectiles were banned, and points were awarded whether the applicant won or lost. The scrawny, tall proctor called Lananas would be fighting Fresa, and would grade out of 60 points. The other two instructors could score up to 40 points each, making it a total of 140.

“And you’ll lose a point for being late too,” Lananas added.

Everyone roared with laughter.

“I feel bad for Fresa-san,” Grida said.

Yeah, but look at her. She’s so nervous that she doesn’t seem to notice the laughter.

Chatter. Chatter. Chatter.

I’ve never seen a person’s teeth chatter that much out of anxiety. Guess I can give her a hand.

Roll. Roll. Roll.

“Hey, what’s that?” someone asked.

Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll.

“A ball? No, it doesn’t look round enough.”

Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll.

“Wait, that’s an apple! Why’s it rolling around?”

Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll.

“Oh no! When did it fall out?! Sorry, that’s my apple!” Fresa cried. She started to chase after me.

How’s this? Maybe a quick warm-up will calm her down.

“You try to sound mean, but you can’t leave her alone after all,” Grida said with a giggle.

Heh heh. I just wanted to exercise a little, is all. Maybe this will help with her nervousness a bit.

“Fresa, you’ve about to lose another point!” the proctor barked.

“Whaaat? No waaay!” she wailed.

Uh, in any case, you should relax. Good luck, Fresa.

“Fresa-san’s actually pretty strong,” Grida said with surprise.

The melee combat test had begun, and Fresa was expertly wielding a wooden training stick and going toe-to-toe with the proctor.

“Oh? She’s pretty quick...” a proctor remarked.

“She seems to have quite a bit of stamina too. Isn’t she a magician? With proper training, she might be able to go on the front lines,” the other proctor said. Looks like she’s making a good impression.

“Furutsu, how did you know she was strong?” Grida asked.

I didn’t really know how strong she was exactly, but remember when she was being chased by the goblins?

“Yeah, she was running away screaming for help.”

I’m able to see pretty far away as an apple, especially compared to my human vision. From the moment she entered my field of vision, she managed to keep away from those goblins—and they weren’t slow either. So I thought her physical capabilities were pretty decent.

“I see. You’re very astute!”

But she’s probably not strong enough to take one down, at least. Look at that proctor, Lananas—blocking all of her attacks without breaking a sweat.

“This is good enough,” one of the seated proctors said.

“Same here. I’m done,” said the other.

In the next moment, Lananas’s stick disappeared from my sight.
So fast!

“Whoa! Amazing!” Grida exclaimed, unable to hide her surprise.

I guess Lananas isn’t a proctor for nothing. That was impressive.

Quick as a flash, Lananas made a circular motion and Fresa’s stick was hurled into the air. It fell to the ground with a clatter.

“That’s the match! Fresa, 32 points!” said Lananas, raising an arm in the air.

“I’m giving 21 points,” said the second proctor.

“You two are awful nice. 21 points,” followed the third.

They really were nice to her. Fresa’s melee combat was probably very impressive to see.

“I don’t get it. How are they nice?” Grida asked.

They decided to overlook the points she lost earlier for tardiness and my rolling fiasco.

“Oh, that’s why they gave out a weird number of points!”

She scored a total of 74 points. That’s amazing.

“Thank you very much!” Fresa panted as she tried to get her breath back. She bowed and smiled. A smattering of applause filled the air. I saw many other applicants fight after, and those requesting to fight on the front lines were extremely skilled, which only made

sense. That's what it takes to be in the vanguard, after all.

"Now we will begin the long-distance support test," a proctor said. We were all led outdoors, where the test would be conducted.

"All riiight! This is where I shiiine!" Fresa said. She grabbed me and started to swing her arms in circles to pump herself up. Since Fresa's a magician, this section should be her forte.

W-Wait, stop! Don't do that! I'm not rolling on my own here, so you're making me dizzy!

"I'll explain the rules. Long-distance support can take a variety of forms, from casting attack spells or throwing weapons from afar, to casting healing spells and providing buffs or items. You'll have to show us what support you'll provide," the proctor said.

I see. So arrows and throwing knives are also acceptable.

"I want you to provide any sort of support you wish on that scarecrow over there." With a sweeping motion, the proctor pointed at a scarecrow in the distance. It had a crudely drawn face and was standing alone in a clearing.

"You have a total of three attempts. If you can hit that scarecrow at all, you'll be awarded 10 points per attempt. If you miss and hit the ground, you'll get 0 points."

Just hitting the target will get us 30 points, huh? The rest is based on the proctor's judgment.

"If your name is called, step forward. First up, Zambarau."

"Oh, I'm first? Sweet!" said a confident voice. A man wearing armor that was clearly made for the front lines stepped forward. He seemed to be a bit of a show-off.

"The two proctors over there and myself will be your judges. We won't listen to any complaints regarding points," the proctor added. Two robed people stood on either side of the target, a short distance away.

Those are proctors?

"Okay, got it. First I'll use...potion throw," Zambarau said, as he reached into a pouch around his waist. He took out a small bottle and threw it towards the target.

It was quite a distance away, but the bottle hit its mark and burst open, its contents spraying in the air with a glimmer.

"Hit! 10 points!" a proctor declared.

"All right! Then next, I'll use this," Zambarau said.

A slingshot, huh? I played with those when I was a kid, but they're pretty hard to aim with...

"Hit! 10 points!"

You made it look so easy. Fair enough, I guess. These people are

making a living off of stuff like this.

“Nice! For my last trick...” Zambarau raised his arms in front of him.

Oh? Is this what I think it is?

“Entreat the moon and unchain the wind. Envelop the unseen, return into dust, and be unmade. Wind magic!” he chanted.

A sharp, metallic sound echoed as the scarecrow’s head was cleaved from its body.

“Hit! 10 points!”

That was awesome. Is he really supposed to be a frontliner? Fresa can’t win against this guy.

“Score! 30 points for all three hits! The vaporization spread of the potion, the choice in targeting the vitals with the slingshot, and the precision with the spell were all very good. I’ll give it a score of 30 points!” the proctor barked.

Whoa, that’s a high score!

“30 points!” said the second instructor.

“35 points!” said the third.

The two robed instructors shouted out their points, each with an arm raised in the air, as they repaired the scarecrow.

125 points. That’s almost perfect! He’s really good!

“Heh, not too shabby, I guess,” Zambarau said with a smirk on his face. He walked off.

I don’t really like him, but he’s got the skills to back it up.

“I think you’re a lot cooler, Furutsu!” Grida said.

Are you judging me based on my redness or shine? That’s not the same, Grida.

Grida giggled. “Everything about you is cool!”

You think? Thanks.

“Next up, Fresa! Step forward!” the instructor shouted.

Her turn already? Good luck!

“Huh? Good luck to you too, right?” Grida said.

Right. She can’t use magic, so I gotta carry her for this part.

“Y-Yes sir! Here I gooo!” Fresa stammered.

Fresa stepped forward while carefully cupping me in her hands. I could hear some snickers break out around us.

Well, fair enough. I am, in fact, an apple after all.

“Please, little apple! Please hit the target!” she said. She kept me in her hands and glared at the scarecrow.

All right. I guess I can give you a hand!

I rolled off of Fresa’s palms and landed on the ground.

“Miss! 0 points!” the instructor said.

Huh?

“What?! Wait! Whyyy?” Fresa cried.

“I told you at the start. If you miss and hit the ground, you get 0 points.”

Oh yeah, they did say that.

“Ha ha ha! Just look at her! Wasn’t she rolling that apple around before too?” Zambarau laughed, clutching his stomach.

Damn him! What a bastard. Still, this isn’t good. If I try to do my tackle from Fresa’s palm, the recoil might blow her away!

“Oh nooo! Please, little apple, could you try to attack while not touching the ground?” Fresa begged. She picked me up, teary-eyed.

Wait! It really wouldn’t end well for you!

“What’s wrong? Why aren’t you making your second attempt? I’ll mark this one as a failure too,” the instructor said.

“Whaaat?! Little apple, pleeease!” she wailed.

No way! I’m sorry, but I can’t help you this time. Okay?

“Fine, then. You’ve failed...”

“Wait! Please wait! I’ll do it!”

Fresa kept me in her hands as she raised her arms out in front of her. She started to chant.

“Unknown traveler, remove the shackles of fire. Unleash the unseen, and return to ashes within the earth. Fire magic!” Beads of red light gathered in her palms.

Oh? Is she gonna unleash her magic? O-Ow! That spell gets pretty hot!

Sizzle.

“Failure to unleash magic. 0 points!” the instructor said.

I knew it.

Just then, I heard a familiar alarm ding in my head. “Detected an unknown spell and activation of magic. This will be registered in the magician card.”

Hm?! Was that an announcement from the Card of Fate?

I heard another ding. “Successfully registered. Users will be ‘Furutsu’ and ‘Grida.’ Default strength set at twenty percent. Safety settings will include the user and entities that make direct contact with the user.”

What’s going on?!

Ding ding! “Spell successfully analyzed. Spell has been abbreviated for efficiency. Incantation shall now be: ‘Remove the shackles of fire, traveler.’ As the spell has been made more effective and powerful, default strength will be set at three percent.”

Wait, seriously, what’s going on? What do you mean the strength is at three percent? What’s that “remove the shackles of fire, traveler” about?!

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at three percent.”

Squeak...

Huh?

“What?” Fresa said.

Fwoom!

Suddenly, everything went red.

“Whaaat?! I did it! I fired a spell!” she cried.

My fireball penetrated the scarecrow at a frightening speed.

“Th-That was amazing...” Zambarau muttered.

I agree.

Nothing but the pole was left standing, and the brick wall a ways behind the clearing sported a huge new hole.

“H-Hit. 10 points!” the instructor said, with a surprised look.

“Hip hip hooray! I knew my apple magic was amazing!” Fresa yelled.

“Furutsu, was that...?” Grida started.

Yeah, that was me. And if I heard right, that was just three percent of its full power.

I felt Fresa gripping me tightly. The last exam was a trial adventure.

“We’ve divided all applicants into groups of five. Each party will have two instructors. Aside from extreme circumstances, the instructors will not participate alongside your party,” the instructor explained. “The parties have been divided based on your respective roles, and I believe each party is well-balanced.”

Last night, I saw Fresa packing as though she was going out, so I kind of had a clue ahead of time. It seemed like the applicants were actually going on an adventure.

“I will now announce the members of each party. Based on the number of people, Group E will have six members, but I believe this is a rather fair distribution based on each person’s ability. I will not accept any complaints regarding party members.”

As a side note, applicants that scored fewer than 40 points on the melee combat and long-distance support tests were sent home.

“For this section, party members will compete amongst themselves for points. There will be a pool of points that will be divided up to each member at the end based on performance. However, keep in mind that you will also get points based on cooperation, teamwork, and completing your mission.”

Makes sense. Even if you go off on your own or try to drag other members down, you’re only hurting yourself.

“The leader of Group B will be Rybíz. Instructors Acti and Nidia will oversee you. They’re both Rank A adventurers.”

The instructors stood next to each other. Acti looked like a muscular warrior—the typical all brawn, no brains type of guy. Nidia was a voluptuous woman, wearing a navy blue robe and holding a

staff topped with a large crystal ball.

“Furutsu, are you into that?” Grida asked.

Huh? What’s up?

“I’m, um, asking if you’re into, er, *bigger...appearances.*”

Ha ha ha. What are you on about? Size doesn’t matter. Besides, as far as that goes, I prefer you much more.

“Really?”

Of course. Each person has their own type, but I prefer you, Grida.

Grida giggled. “Thanks, Furutsu! I like you a lot too!”

I was glad that Grida cheered up, but I wondered if she was the type to worry about appearances. I’ve never actually seen it before myself, but in the storage card’s list, Gridarvol the staff was decorated with a beautiful, green jewel. It wasn’t too big or flashy, but it gave off an air of elegance. Nidia’s crystal ball may have been flashy, but it looked heavy and difficult to wield in battle.

I’m definitely a bigger fan of Grida’s jewel.

“Huh? Did you say something?” Grida asked.

Hm? Oh, I was just thinking that I do prefer you.

“Oh my! You’re so passionate, Furutsu!”

Hm? Y-You think so? I feel like we’re not on the same page here.

“Group C: Zambarau, Fresa, Ciruela, Sliva, and Prunum,” the instructor barked.

Oh, Fresa’s in Group C.

“Zambarau will be Group C’s leader.”

He’s the leader? He did get a high score, I guess.

“You will be followed by instructors Holmer, a Rank A adventurer, and Elumichai, a Rank B adventurer.”

Oh, wasn’t Holmer one of Fresa’s friends? So he was an adventurer, huh?

“Holmer-san?!” Fresa exclaimed with surprise.

“Hey, Fresa. Glad to see you made it till the end,” said Holmer.

I don’t know the details, but it seems like she needs his approval to become an adventurer. I wonder what kind of relationship they have.

“Jeez. Just because I told you that you’re not ready to be an adventurer doesn’t mean you have to tag along with a different party and do their dirty work. You even left the city. Think before you do something boneheaded like this,” he said with a sigh.

“But it’s your faaault! You’re the one who won’t let me be an adventurer!” she wailed.

“I told you that you could do whatever you wanted, provided you had the skills.”

He sounds more like her guardian than her friend.

“Anyways, I’ll grade you fairly. You’d better do your best,” he said.

“I-I’m definitely going to become an adventurer!” she replied.

Good luck, Fresa. If you take me along in your adventures, I might be able to gather some clues about the World Tree. Besides, if I traveled by myself, I’d definitely stand out.

“Excuse me, may I ask a question? My name is Sliva,” said a young man with his hand raised. He was wearing leather armor and the weak spots were reinforced with metal. He had a hat with a feather stuck in it, and a large bow was slung on his back.

“Hm? What’s up?” Holmer asked, turning to face him.

“Is it all right for an instructor to be friends with one of the applicants?”

After pondering the question, Holmer answered. “The moment the party members and instructors were announced, I reported to the guildmaster about my relationship with her. Of course, I’ll be fair in my judgment and won’t choose favorites. In fact...” He glanced over at Fresa. “If I were to add my personal feelings into this, Fresa would actually be put at a disadvantage. I’m against her becoming an adventurer.”

True. Judging from yesterday’s conversation, Holmer did seem to be against it.

“I understand. Thank you for answering.” Sliva bowed and stepped back. However, Holmer and Fresa wouldn’t stop glaring at each other.

“Ugh. I’ll have to do my best and have him accept meee,” she muttered. “Please help me out, little apple!”

Sure thing. Leave it to me. I need you to become an adventurer.

“I hope you’ve all gotten comfortable with your parties,” the instructor said. “I’ll now announce each group’s mission. Group A will explore the House of Insects. Specifically, you will explore the small room in the east wing, located on the third floor of its basement.”

Did they finish announcing the parties already? I guess there were only five.

“Ugh! I hate bugs...” mumbled a member of Group A.

“Isn’t the House of Insects filled with traps? Will we be okay?” said another.

A bug-type demon? Or are they just regular bugs? Either way, an apple like myself might get eaten.

“Group B will explore the church ruins in the Forest of Guidance,” the instructor announced.

“Crap. Did anyone in our party have an anti-spirit weapon?” asked a member of Group B.

“I have some Holy Water, but that definitely won’t be enough.”

Sounds like a hangout for ghosts. We’ve even got the supernatural stuff here too?

The instructor continued. "Group C will explore the deepest part of the Chasm of Catastrophe."

So is our goal inside this cave?

"H-Hey, didn't a monster pop out of the Chasm and destroy an entire country?" someone asked.

"Yeah. There's a stone sign at the entrance with that story, but who knows how true that is?"

"Right. Weren't the depths of the Chasm explored many years ago? I heard that no one found anything, so we should be okay, right?"

A monster that destroyed an entire country, huh?

"Group D will collect Luminous Moss from the Waterfall Basin of Malice," said the instructor.

"Aren't there man-eating fish around there?" asked a Group D member.

"Why don't we just grow our own moss?"

Man-eating fish, huh? I should be fine, 'cause, you know!

"Group E will go inside the red ghost ship located at Death's Point and transcribe the ship's log," said the instructor.

"What? I thought the Scarlet George was already destroyed!" exclaimed a Group E member.

"No, that was apparently a double. Merchant and fishing ships still disappeared after that supposedly happened, remember?" another chimed in.

A ghost ship?! We've got a lot of stuff going on here.

"That will be all. If anyone has any weaknesses or vulnerabilities that could handicap you for this exam, let me know immediately! Something like that could prove fatal, so don't keep it to yourselves!" the instructor barked. "After a brief meeting, you'll all depart on your mission. You must be back before sundown in three days!"

Each group was then led to a private room for their meetings, and were given the chance to brainstorm after receiving a few instructions. Fresa and the rest of Group C were led down a corridor into a room a short distance away from the testing area.

By the way, for the long-distance support test, Fresa scored only 60 points thanks to her first two failures. If she doesn't score at least 70 points in this final test, she'll fail the exam.

"Group C, you'll use this room. Wait here until an instructor arrives."

We were given a decently large room that was lined with chairs and desks. As we made our way inside, Zambarau excitedly turned towards Fresa. "That spell you used earlier was awesome! Is this your apple magic?"

Hearing his excitement, the rest of the group also gathered around

her.

“Heh heh, Fresa-san’s popular!” Grida said.

Yeah. Seems like her “apple magic” left a lasting impression on others.

“You didn’t chant a spell for that, did you? How did you cast it?!” someone asked.

Uh, that’s because I’m the one that cast it. How’s Fresa gonna get out of this one?

“Do you see this apple heeere? It’s said that a very powerful magician took some soil from the depths of the demon world and grew it!”

According to who? Did you just come up with that explanation? Where did that come from?

“And the seed used to plant the tree actually came from the Heavens! It came from the Forbidden Fruit that the first man and woman took a bite of! It’s a divine fruit, you seeee!”

Oh yeah? Then maybe you should harvest my fifty-four divine siblings.

“That’s amazing! But it makes sense, since that apple fired a Court Sorcerer-level spell!” someone else said.

I’m a Court Sorcerer with just three percent of my power? I should be careful, for Fresa’s sake. Things will get messy if the country gets involved.

“That’s not all! My apple magic doesn’t stop there! This apple can also attack enemies itself and crush them into smithereeeens! Maybe I can show this ability off during the final test!” Fresa said with a beam.

She’s making it worse?! Let’s call it there, please. Tackling isn’t even magic! We’ll stand out if you force me to attack like that!

“I’m looking forward to it,” Zambarau replied, grinning.

I get that you’re eager, but this isn’t good for me.

Grida giggled. “I get to go on an adventure with you, Furutsu! I’m so excited!”

Oh, you’re eager too, are you? Fine. I’ll try to act like a divine apple. But I’ll also try my best not to stand out! I need to be more low-key.

The door opened as two instructors entered the room.

“Thanks for your patience. I guess I’ll introduce myself again. My name is Holmer, and I’ll be overseeing your group,” he said.

“I’m Elumichai,” the other instructor added.

“The Chasm of Catastrophe that you all will be exploring is a very popular dungeon around Kalabuya. The stone sign at the entrance reads, ‘A monster emerged from the depths and annihilated a country.’ That’s where this dungeon got its name,” Holmer explained as he passed out a piece of paper to each group member. He seemed very familiar with this process. “However, because the sign was written in an ancient text that was difficult to decipher, and we haven’t confirmed the presence of any demons that could cause such a

catastrophe, we're not quite sure how reliable it is."

As Holmer finished his explanation, Elumichai unfurled a tall roll of paper and hung it on the wall.

"Everyone, read the paper I just passed out," Holmer said as he reached into his pocket.

What did he just take out? An hourglass?

"You may ask questions until the sand falls to the bottom twice. After that, I may have to deduct points if you simply try to strike a conversation with me. Once the sand falls to the bottom a third time, I'll collect your handouts." He put the hourglass on the desk and flipped it over, and after a brief clamor, every group member had their eyes glued to the handout.

"What I hung on the wall is a simple map of the Chasm of Catastrophe. I can't lend this to you, but I will allow you to copy it down," Elumichai said with a smile. "Oh, also, if you do happen to have a map of the Chasm with you, please let me know. I'll have to collect it because you're forbidden from using any maps other than the one I've provided. You'll get it back once this is over."

They're a lot stricter than I imagined. It's like we're on a sports team... No, it's more like the military, I think.

Each group member started checking their supplies and discussing their battle strategies.

"Once you're finished, you can set off. We'll follow you shortly after," said Holmer.

At once, everyone grabbed their supplies and stood up. Our dungeon exploration, a staple in fantasy worlds, had just begun.

A Brief Intermission: Holmer's Diary

Fresa returned today. I called off her search. I'd hired eight Rank C adventurers for eight days and the fee came to eighty-seven silver coins. That's not chump change.

You know I can't cause a fuss and search for you, don't you? You're that type of girl. Why can't she just sit still? Why does she want to be an adventurer? I mean, I know. I know why. But I... What? What am I to her? I feel so stupid. I'm supposed to just watch over her. That's it.

It did look like she learned a weird spell though. Can you even call that magic? But that was definitely Sedel's corpse. If that apple's being used as a catalyst for her magic, it's not impossible, I guess. I've never seen a fruit used before, but there's magic out there that activates through other everyday goods. The apple doesn't seem cursed, and there's no sign of it being tied to a demon or anything, but it still feels a little suspicious. It's not that I get bad vibes from it, but something's just a little off.

So I'll have her show me directly. I won't hold her back, but I won't help her either. But if that apple magic can really defeat Sedel, and if Fresa really does make it until the last test... With that in mind, I pulled a few strings—and all it took was that legendary liquor brewed back in 865. The guildmaster was all smiles when I handed it over.

I didn't want to part with it, but I guess it was for a good cause. With this, I can "coincidentally" end up as Fresa's instructor. If not, I'll have to take that liquor back. Her test location is the Chasm of Catastrophe, which should be a fairly safe area. It may seem pretty "unusual," but I'm sure the test location was "decided beforehand." I pulled out two gold coins from my pocket to seal the deal.

I'm sure all this has really stumped the two that are in charge of organizing the test parties.

Seriously, this isn't chump change.

Chapter 3: The Chasm of Catastrophe

“Hey! Why are you guys all lined up like ducks in a row? You’re eyesores!”

“Damn, I didn’t think we’d be unlucky enough to bump into a guild testing party today.”

“If you brats get in our way, I won’t let you off easy!”

Three mean-looking people headed towards us.

Do those three scary-looking demons live in the Chasm? All right, I’ll use my special Apple Fire skill and burn them to a crisp!

“Don’t do that, Furutsu,” Grida said. “They look scary, but they’re still just people!”

Ha ha ha! Really? They’re humans? I must’ve missed that! Silly me!

That trio better be grateful that Grida saved their lives.

“Hey, instructors! You better keep a close eye on these little kids so they don’t get in our way!” one of them called out.

The instructors waved their hands as if to shoo the three away. In terms of rank and power, Holmer and Elumichai probably trumped them easily, but our instructors likely didn’t want any trouble in the middle of a guild exam.

“Good, they’re gone. It’s best to ignore people like that,” said the group leader, Zambarau.

A smart and level-headed response. Everyone else is handling this well too... Wait, is Fresa glaring at those guys? She’s surprisingly temperamental.

We arrived at the entrance of the Chasm of Catastrophe. In front of us was the stone signpost that was inscribed with that story about the terrible monster.

“Let’s confirm our mission and our respective roles one more time before we go in,” said Zambarau, as we stopped at the entrance.

Hey, I can read that signpost.

“Huh?! But didn’t Holmer-san say it was written in some impossible language?” Grida said.

Ha ha. When I was reincarnated, my base abilities were boosted. I guess automatic translation was part of it. Speech and writing are both automatically converted into my mother tongue.

“Wow! Can you understand every language, then?”

Heh heh. Of course! I can read anything from ancient texts to scribbles on the bathroom walls... Hey, wait a second!

“Is something wrong?”

Hey, Grida. They said that the sign read, “A monster emerged from the depths and annihilated a country,” right?

“Yup. But we don’t know if that’s true.”

Well, then they left out the most important part. A sign in front of a dungeon usually has some important warning message. Why did they do such a half-baked translation?

“What important part?”

If you were able to read the sign in full, you wouldn’t want to go in and out of here however you please—this is some bad news. This is what I see: “The live bait is gone, and the master and its spawn have fallen into slumber. None shall step foot in this chasm. The master devours a thousand to spawn a hundred offspring, and requires ten thousand beings to raise a thousand underlings. Men, women, the old, and the young have all been devoured until this land’s peoples were no more. The master and its spawn have fallen into slumber. They will rest a while until the country teems with people once more. Thus, one must never venture near this place. Should one near the threshold, one may disturb the master’s slumber and invite the terrors that hide within.”

“Furutsu, you mean...this area is some kind of nest?” Grida said, horrified.

Seems like it. Terrible, right? That “thing” that annihilated an entire country is sleeping somewhere, just waiting for humans to repopulate.

“That’s terrifying.”

Exactly. Showing up here is like waving a sign over your head saying, “Look! Humans are back! Time to wake up!”

Fresa and the group made it to the second floor, defeating quite a few demons along the way. Holmer and Elumichai were following the group from a short distance, cutting down the occasional wormlike monster that barred their path. Holmer in particular was extremely swift and skilled at it.

Zambarau can’t even begin to compare to Holmer. Rank A adventurers are amazing.

“Holmer-san’s very strong,” Grida agreed.

He sure is. If I had arms and legs, I bet I could cut things down just as gracefully... Huh?

“Furutsu?”

Now that I think about it, I reincarnated, but I can’t hold anything.

“F-Furutsu?”

Even if I did have a legendary sword, I’d just get some “Cannot Equip” pop-up. Isn’t it weird for a main character of one of these things to be an apple?

“Uh, Furutsu?!”

Also, even if I did defeat monsters without any equipment, fighting my way through the life-and-death trials of an adventure, what am I gonna do when I roll into a village? Is the guy at the village entrance gonna say, “Hello, welcome to Blah Blah Village!” to an apple? I can’t even use the “drop” command! The button’s gray! It’s freaking grayed out!

“Command? Grayed out? Calm down, Furutsu!”

This sucks! It’s so unfair! And while we’re at it, why are the people at the village entrance never in armor?! You’re guarding the place!

Aaaaaaagh!

“Furutsu, calm down! You can use magic! You’re super powerful!”

I gasped.

“You’re fine just the way you are!” she continued. “Even if you can’t equip anything, even if you’re round and red, you’re still wonderful!”

Grida? I-I... What was I saying?

“Have you calmed down?”

S-Sorry, I lost myself for a bit there. I started to really think about how unlucky I’ve been, and I couldn’t control myself.

“I understand. You were an animal, but you all of a sudden you’re turned into a plant. Are you okay now?”

Yeah. I’m fine now. Thank you.

“Heh heh, good!”

Everyone but Fresa had worked hard to keep themselves out of danger. Sitting back is great and all, but me not doing anything meant Fresa wasn’t doing anything either. We probably weren’t scoring any points here.

“There are quite a few people on this floor,” said Prunum, who was a muscular and unfriendly looking guy.

The Chasm of Catastrophe was apparently very popular among adventurers. The monsters here dropped valuable items, and there were a seemingly infinite number of rooms filled with precious metals and jewelry, along with human bones. There were so many people in this dungeon, it practically felt like a holiday resort.

“Our goal is the fifth floor, the deepest part of the dungeon. I understand the appeal of hunting for treasure, but we should focus on our mission,” Zambarau said.

“I agree. We can explore this area all we want once we become actual adventurers,” Sliva added.

Upon hearing this conversation, Elumichai leaned over to Holmer and whispered something in his ear. They talked quietly for a few moments before scribbling something in their notebooks.

I see, even the conversations between party members are worth points. Looks like everyone is planning to ignore the monster corpses and move on.

“Whaaat? But it feels like such a waste...” said Fresa.

Never mind. Seems like not everyone can ignore treasure.

She kept glancing back at the corpses and was unable to hide her sad expression. Holmer buried his face in his hands with a look of disappointment. Next to him, Elumichai was scribbling furiously in the notebook.

Hm. I guess that’s a penalty.

“Furutsu, why is there so much treasure on the floor?” Grida asked.

This nest probably dragged in thousands—no, tens, maybe even hundreds of thousands of people to their demise. A whole region’s population was devoured. I’m sure their stuff just got left here, along with the monster’s leftovers.

“Eek! I s-see. These valuables would be worthless to the monster.”

Probably. Or it could just be that the monster instinctively knows that leaving treasure by the entrance would entice more people inside.

“Woohoo! I found another room! Look at all this treasure!” someone excitedly yelled nearby.

Hey, don’t make too much noise. The treasure’s just bait for the fisherman on the other end.

“I’m scared. This is so creepy!” Grida wailed.

Don’t worry, Grida. I’ll protect you, no matter what.

“Furutsu...”

This dangerous monster was lying in wait simply because it ate everyone and wanted humans to repopulate the area, and people wandering around in here might seriously wake it up!

Hm? What’s that? Why didn’t I stop Fresa and her group from entering this dangerous dungeon? Of course I tried! If I could yell, I would’ve done it already!

“You really did try your hardest, didn’t you?”

Yeah. I rolled and jumped and did everything I could, but no one understood me. Which is fair. I probably just looked like a dancing apple to them. All I can do now is pray that the monster lurking in here doesn’t wake up.

Fresa and the rest of Group C made short work of the first and second floors. After descending a long spiral staircase, we arrived at the third floor. This floor also had quite a few adventurers, and the clearing immediately in front of the staircase was filled with people selling food and items on mats.

“Listen up, everyone. According to the map, the third floor is the largest—ten times bigger than our goal, the fifth floor,” Zambarau said, his voice echoing through the cavern. It seems like this floor also

has the most remaining treasure, so not too many people venture past this point.

No wonder this floor seems more crowded than the first two.

“There are a few places here that might seem a bit crowded and tight, but this should be the fastest route to the fourth floor,” he said, pointing to the map he must’ve copied during the meeting.

“Hold on a moment, please,” Sliva said. “There may be many people here, but there are also a lot of monsters. It might take a bit more time, but perhaps we should choose a route that gives us more space to fight...”

That’s a reasonable opinion. Hmmm...there’s something about this map...

“Is something wrong?” Grida asked.

No, it’s just that as I take a closer look, the Chasm of Catastrophe looks familiar. Where have I seen this before?

“Really?”

Yeah. I don’t remember exploring many tunnels in my past life though. There’s this long, one-way tunnel. These small tunnels branch out, leading to small rooms. Each level of this chasm is considered a floor, but there’s a long, vertical passageway that connects all of them. Each cut-off point, or boundary of the passageway, is just regarded as a floor. All of this just looks so familiar...

“All right, then! We’ll use this route. Let’s go!” said Zambarau. Everyone began to walk forward.

Darn. A few more minutes with that map, and I might have remembered something.

Fresa and the group headed towards the staircase to the fourth floor. As usual, there were a lot of monsters, but the members of Group C were skilled. We steadily marched forward without any intervention on my end.

Hey, Fresa, I’ve said this before, but if I don’t do anything, you’re not gonna get any points. Be a bit more ambitious, will you?

“Hey, Furutsu, look!” Grida cried.

What’s up? I looked around and found the trio that heckled us at the dungeon entrance. *Ugh, those guys again?*

“Hey, look at those little birdies, all lined up in a row. They’re so useless.”

“We went out of our way to find this new passage, but now they’ve gotta show up and rain on our parade.”

“Tsk! Stop looking at us! The treasure up ahead is all ours. Hey, you! Don’t come any closer!”

It seemed like the rowdy trio had found a treasure room filled with bait from the monster. A thin guy, who looked like he was good with his hands, carefully scratched at the wall to open the

entranceway. The second guy, who was on the shorter side, looked like a magician, and he was chanting a spell while glaring at us. The last guy was big and burly, with a sneer on his face. He kept flashing his axe at us as a form of intimidation. In response, Holmer and Elumichai, who had kept their distance, let out a menacing aura right back, but the little guy and the big guy kept trying to intimidate our group. Honestly—their ranks might have been low, but they were still adventurers. They should have known that the instructors following us outclassed them. Maybe that treasure was just that important to them, and they were desperate.

“All right! I found the hidden passageway! We’ll be rich!” the thin man called out, his echoing voice breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“You hear me? Not another step closer,” the short guy said. He finished chanting his spell, and put his arms up towards us, as if to fire something.

“Heh heh heh. Treasure! Riches! Treasure!” the big man yelled.

In that instant, the wall collapsed, and only the thin man’s torch lit the dark passageway ahead. What they found wasn’t treasure, but dozens of eyes, staring directly at them.

The man peeked in and screamed. “What? H-Hey?! What is that?! Auuugh!”

He was dragged inside, torch and all. “Eek! Help m—” **Crunch!**

As his cry for help was silenced, everyone held their breath. A moment after his voice faded, we heard a rustling sound from deep within the passageway, slowly creeping closer.

“Wh-What’s going on? What’s that sound?” the big man shouted in a panic.

I think I know what’s coming out of the darkness. I’ve heard this sound before—ants! I knew the chasm reminded me of something. It was an ant colony!

“Aaaack! A m-monster?!” the big man screamed.

“Damn, take this! Fire spell!” Beads of red light gathered on the short man’s hand as he shifted his target. With a loud boom, he launched a spell into the passageway.

“D-Did that do it?!” he said.

The smoke cleared, and we saw a large number of black monsters headed our way, unfazed.

“M-My magic isn’t working?!” the short man said.

“Damn it! My attacks aren’t going through! I can’t damage them!” the large man shouted, swinging his axe towards the monsters. Sparks flew as he made contact with one’s outer shell before his axe bounced off without making a dent.

“No! Noooooooooo!”

“O-Owww! My leg! My leg! Someone! Help meeeeeee!” The two

screamed as they were dragged into the passageway.

I'm sure we all want to gloat and remind them that they had it coming, but they're already dead. Let's just forgive them.

"They're coming towards us now! Stay vigilant and fall back!" Zambarau ordered, pulling out his sword.

Luckily, our group didn't make the same mistake as the men before us and stayed back. We were unharmed, for now.

We should all be thankful for their greed.

Holmer, who had been watching from afar, quickly made his way towards us. "Wait, stop!" he yelled. "This is an emergency. The exam is on hold for now! Everyone, fall back!" The black demons started spilling out from the passageway.

I knew it. These monsters are like Sedel.

"The monster we beat before?" Grida asked.

Yeah. I think it was tagged as a B Class. Its limbs were so long that I didn't think it was an ant. It seemed like "tags" were used to classify the danger and urgency for certain monsters by the guild. They were like wanted posters.

"Th-There's so many of them! And they look like that man-eating ant!" Holmer exclaimed.

"Are they in the same class as Sedel, the one I defeated with my apple magic? There sure are a lot of them!" Fresa said.

"Hey, is Sedel a C Class?" someone asked.

"No, he was a B! We can't kill even one of those! There's no way we can defeat a whole h-horde!"

Fresa and the party kept retreating. As Holmer had said, the exam wasn't a priority anymore.

"Aaaaagh!"

"Huh? Wh-What are those things?!"

It was as if a military force had suddenly marched into a holiday resort. A pandemonium broke out on the third floor of the dungeon.

"Don't worry about others! Just focus on escaping with your life first!" Holmer called out. He and Elumichai were watching the ants while trying to let us escape.

"Holmer-san, I'll fight too! Remember Fresa-chan's signature apple magic? I can beat these monsters!" Fresa said.

"No. You guys are too inexperienced—you aren't even an adventurer yet. Leave it to the pros and run. Got it?" he replied with a stern look on his face.

"I understand," she replied after a brief silence.

The passageway to the second floor was flooded with adventurers running for their lives.

"Hey! Stop that! Don't push!" someone yelled.

"Eek! They're getting closer!" another person shrieked.

There's too many people here. It's almost as crowded as the last time I went to the beach. At this rate, not all of us are gonna make it out.

"Holmer-san, if this keeps up..." Elumichai started.

"I know. Worst case, I'll leave Group C to you," he replied.

It seems like the instructors have resolved themselves, but even if Holmer's extremely strong, there's no way he'd stand a chance against a monster that devoured a country.

"Damn...is this it for us?" Prunum mumbled under his breath.

From deep within the dark passageway, we could hear the screams of the adventurers that lagged behind and the rustling sound of the ants. It was only a matter of time until they reached us here.

"Instructor, sir! I have an idea!" Zambarau said.

"What?" Holmer replied.

"Our group will be done for before we can reach the upper floors. Since the ants are making their way up towards the entrance, how about we go down instead, find a safe place, and see if we can survive?"

Guess he's got the brains too. That's not a bad idea, though there's no guarantee that help will show up.

"Good idea. Luckily, we have plenty of food and water. We could last for a few days."

We should pray that help will arrive by then. Once we're out of rations, they might eat me.

"All right. We'll go with that plan. Does anyone have any complaints?" Holmer asked.

No one raised their hands. It seemed everyone understood that staying here would only lead to death.

"We should hurry, before the ants block the passage to the lower floors," Zambarau said.

"You're right. It'll take some time, but let's head for the passage on the other side of the dungeon. We should be able to head down from there. Follow me!"

Holmer guided us as we desperately made our way towards the passage to the fourth floor. "Good. Seems like the ants aren't here yet."

Like the other passageways, this one had a huge wooden spiral staircase leading downwards, with a few rope ladders in case of an emergency.

"Elumichai will lead the way. I'll be at the very back. Should we get stuck here and the ants arrive, I'll use every ounce of my power to stop them," Holmer said.

Wow, he's really committed to his job. He's a shining example for all

adventurers. *It's seriously respectable.*

"Don't you worry about me. I'll flip this over three times," he said, taking out his hourglass. "If nothing happens within that time, I'll follow you down. Elumichai, once you reach the next floor, if I'm not there within one flip of an hourglass, keep moving and watch your rear."

Elumichai nodded.

"All right. Take care, you guys," Holmer said, turning his back towards us with a sword in his hand.

The rest of us descended the staircase. Occasionally, Fresa—and only Fresa—would cast a glance behind us.

"Don't worry. Holmer-san's strong," Elumichai said, reassuring Fresa with a gentle smile.

"I know," Fresa replied, looking glum nonetheless.

The staircase seemed to go on endlessly, lit only by our lanterns. We all fell silent, and only the slight tapping of our footsteps echoed through the passageway.

"Stay vigilant. Other monsters could be lurking anywhere." Zambarau's voice bounced off the stone walls.

A few people responded "Roger!" and we continued our silent descent, glancing at our surroundings.

"It's about the end of the third flip," Sliva noted, glancing at the hourglass in Elumichai's hand.

It's about time for Holmer to make his descent. If nothing goes wrong, that is. If the ants do show up, he'll probably fight them until he dies.

"Holmer-san..." Fresa said with a worried look on her face. She looked back up the passageway again.

"Fresa, are you okay?" Zambarau asked. She nodded silently.

You're not okay at all.

"I'm worried about him too," Grida said.

Yeah. If Holmer's buying us time, he's sacrificing his own odds to live for our odds of escaping. I really hope he makes it back okay.

After a while, I saw the end of the passageway. *The others probably can't see it yet, but we're close.*

A bit later, one of our party members cried, "Yes! We made it to the fourth floor! Nothing unusual here!"

Good, we managed to escape safely.

"Don't let your guard down. Keep observing your surroundings, and let me know if any of you feel ill," Elumichai said, flipping over the hourglass.

We just have to wait for one flip, and hope Holmer shows up...

Thud.

Something fell from above us.

"Wait, what's that?"

“I-It’s...”

It’s an arm. A bloody arm from the elbow down, to be precise.

“Elumichai-san! Th-This gauntlet is...” Fresa started.

There’s no mistaking it. That’s Holmer’s arm.

We all took a few deep breaths and someone let out a small scream.

“I’m sorry, everyone! Please go on without me!” Fresa said, heading back towards the staircase.

“Wait!” Zambarau said, grabbing onto her arm.

“Please, let go! I have to go! Holmer-san...he’s gonna die!”

“There’s nothing you can do even if you go back there! I’m sorry, but we have to move forward!”

“Noooooo!” Fresa screamed. “Holmer-san! Holmer-saaan!” She struggled to get out of Zambarau’s grip.

“No! You’re gonna die too!” he said, desperately trying to stop her.

“Furutsu...” Grida said.

Yeah. It might be too late, but I can’t just keep watching. I’ll try to do something.

Fresa yelped, surprised by my sudden movement as I squeezed myself out of her hand.

Don’t worry, it’s not like I’m squeezing out any juices. I felt her let go of me, and I rolled onto the ground. I just have to aim for his breastplate and hit as hard as I... I mean, gently tackle him. I’ll have to hit him as lightly as possible.

Clang!

Okay, that was good.

“I-Is this your apple magic? Fresa, you...” Zambarau said, as he let go of her arm and stepped back.

“L-Little apple?”

All right, now it’s your turn, Fresa. I’ll use my weakest tackle and aim for your backpack! Hup!

“Ack?!” she cried.

As I hit the backpack, Fresa was pushed back towards the staircase.

Okay! I’ll aim for the space between Zambarau and Fresa. Power at one percent! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

Ding! “Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at one percent.”

Fwoosh!

The flames burned the ground, creating a crater between Fresa and the party.

“Wh-What are you doing, Fresa?!”

All right, I’ll leave the theatrics to you.

“Don’t come any closer! Please! Stay away!” Fresa cried, scooping

me up and raising me over her head. She made a brave face with a stiff upper lip. "I'm sorry for my selfishness, but I think I can save Holmer-san!"

She really went and said it. I wonder where she gets that confidence from?

"D-Don't be an idiot! There's no way you can go up against that many monsters! Come back here!" Zambarau shouted.

"One percent!"

"Huh?"

Huh?

"That was a mere one percent of my power! If I give it my all, my power will increase a hundredfold!"

"How do you know that?!"

Why do you know that?!

"How does Fresa-san know about your magic?" Grida asked. She looked genuinely surprised, and I couldn't hide my shock either.

I think she just said that as a bluff. She might've just happened to get the right percentage.

"Fire-Apple magic! Five percent strength!" Fresa cried.

Order coming right up! Five percent of my strength in the same area! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

FWOOM!

This round made the crater even deeper. The whole area from Fresa to Zambarau was burnt pitch black.

Fresa's amazing. People usually can't be this adaptable.

"I can cast this spell infinitely!" she cried.

Uh, no, I don't think I can do that.

"That's amazing. This apple magic is powerful..."

"T-Terrifying. This forbidden fruit, grown from the soil of Hell, is absolutely terrifying."

I don't even know what the truth is anymore.

"Everyone, please go on without me. I'll defeat all those ants!" Fresa said.

Defeat? Wait, Fresa, stay focused! Our goal here is to save Holmer, remember?

Zambarau paused for a moment before relenting. "I understand."



Do you really, group leader? Have you guys not noticed that she changed her objective there?

“You better come back alive with that instructor!” he said.

“I will! Thank you, Zambarau!”

Phew. Seems like that’s settled.

Fresa clutched me tight and ran up the staircase. “Please...please be okay, Holmer-san!”

I blew through three ants’ heads.

“Furutsu, over there!” Grida cried.

All right, here comes ant number four.

“Holmer-san? Where are you?!” Fresa yelled as she ran up the stairs, looking around frantically.

Seriously? Look beneath you.

“Ah...ahhhh!” she shrieked. A huge pool of blood spread out before her, with drag marks leading deeper into the passageway.

“Little apple! Please...protect me and Holmer-san.”

Of course.

“He must be alive somewhere! He must!” she said, following the trail of blood.

“Furutsu, there are ants over there!” Grida warned.

Really? You can see so much better than me!

Using three percent of my power, I aimed in the direction that Grida instructed. Sure enough, before long I saw some burning ants.

Whoa, there really were ants over there! Good going, Grida!

“Heh heh. No problem... Ack! Furutsu, behind us!”

A sneak attack?! The ant I thought I killed raised a leg and slashed across Fresa’s shoulder. She screamed.

Damn it! You rotten ant!

I blasted the ant with another spell and killed it for good.

Insects sure are strong. They just don’t die.

“Ugh... H-Holmer-san,” Fresa muttered. Despite the profuse bleeding, she paid no attention to her wound as she kept running forward.

I messed up. That wound is deep.

“There he is!”

Holmer was in the middle of a moderately large room.

There’s... Whoa, there’s a lot of ants here!

Twenty-seven ants surrounded Holmer, who was sprawled out on the ground bleeding.

Were we...too late?

“Nooooo! Don’t die, Holmer-san!”

Damn it! I won't forgive these monsters! I'll destroy them all!

Ding Ding! "An error has occurred due to attempted selection of multiple targets. Troubleshooting."

Is this from the Cards of Fate?!

Ding Ding! "The error has been corrected. You will now be allowed to select multiple targets. Y/N?"

I can do that?! These cards are great! Of course I'll choose Y! Yes! Yes!

Ding Ding! "The magician card shall gain the ability to select multiple targets. 3...2...1... Successfully added. Anything in your field of vision shall be selected as a target and can be attacked simultaneously."

Suddenly, all the ants in my cone of vision had a red check mark on them.

This must be the targeting ability, right?

"Furutsu, be careful! Holmer-san's got that red symbol on him too!" Grida warned.

Whoa! That was close! How do I take it off of him? Phew, great, if I kind of shift my focus off of him, the check mark disappears. All right, take this! Strength at two percent! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

Ding. "Confirmed activation of spell. Strength at two percent."

The room was filled with red light as the fire I cast instantly scorched all the ants. They shrieked in high-pitched tones as they quickly burned to death.

Multi-targeting is great! I think...I was able to avenge Holmer.

"Holmer-san! Stay with me!" Fresa cried.

Oh, right. I didn't actually confirm that he was dead. The situation looked so dire that I went all "avenge mode." But this doesn't look good. Damn...if only we got here a little earlier!

"F-Fre...sa? Why...are you...here?" Holmer coughed.

"Don't talk any more!"

He's alive! Sorry, I assumed you were already...

"Fresa, y-you're...injured," Holmer said, taking shallow breaths. He raised one arm towards her. "Thieves approach and break the water's seal. The damp unseen shall become nectar, and fill the empty sky. Water magic." Her body was enveloped with blue light.

Her wound...it's healing!

"Holmer-san! Heal yourself first!" she screamed.

Holmer chuckled. "Heh, as...you can see...ugh...my wounds...aren't treatable."

His wounds are deep. It's a miracle he's alive, much less able to talk at all.

"Run... Your apple magic...is powerful. So please...run...away..."

"No! Let's go together! Please! Holmer-san!"

Fresa. There's nothing we can do now. I'm sorry, but we have to leave him...

Ding Ding! "Detected an 'unknown spell' and 'activation of magic.' This will be registered in the magician card."

*What?! This announcement is just like the one from the time I learned fire magic! So **that's** how this card works!*

"Furutsu, did you learn the skill that Holmer-san used?" Grida said.

Yeah. I think I get how this works now. If I hear and then experience the spell, it'll get registered in my magician card.

Ding Ding! "Successfully registered. Users will be 'Furutsu' and 'Grida.' Default strength set at one hundred percent. Safety settings are not required."

All right! Maybe I can do something with this!

Ding Ding! "Successfully analyzed the spell. Spell has been abbreviated for efficiency. Incantation shall now be: 'Break the water's seal, thieves.' Due to the increase in power, user may experience adverse effects. Default strength will be changed to twenty percent for 'Furutsu' and two percent for 'Grida.' The user, and those that make direct contact with the user, can change the safety settings."

See? It's been analyzed and upgraded! Wait, healing magic can have adverse effects on the user? Also, I think it said this before too, but...

"Furutsu, it called out my name too!" Grida said.

Yeah, and because of those adverse effects, we were given different settings. I got twenty percent, and you got two percent. That must mean your magic is ten times stronger than mine.

"My magic is stronger than yours?"

Yeah. You must be extremely compatible with magic. You were made into a magical staff, after all. Agh! That still makes me mad!

"Huh? Wh-What about it?"

They made you into a staff and trapped you in this box? If I were you, I wouldn't be able to handle it. I want to have everyone involved on their knees in front of me, so I can give them a stern talking to.

"Furutsu..."

Sorry. I got too emotional there. I should treat Holmer.

"Furutsu, can I cast the water magic on Holmer?"

Huh? Sure. Of course you can! All right, please heal him!

"Okay! I will! Break the water's seal, thieves!"

Ding! I heard another announcement. "Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at two percent."

Through me, Grida cast a spell that felt oddly warm. A gentle blue light surrounded Holmer's body with a soft glow.

"L-Little apple...did you cast a healing spell on Holmer-san?!" Fresa exclaimed.

This one isn't me. I'm miraculously channeling the spirit of the World Tree! It's ten times more effective than my magic! I think!

"Hooray! I was able to use my magic!" Grida said.

Yeah, that was great, Grida!

"I'm so happy! I think I can support you from now on!"

What are you talking about? You've been a big help from the start. You're my partner and an amazing magician!

"An amazing magician?"

Yep, and we're in a party together!

"I'm in a party with you? Eek! I'm so happy!"

Seeing you happy makes me happy.

"Hey, Furutsu, look at Holmer-san!"

The blue light's fading, but no dice on the missing arm. I guess we couldn't regenerate that.

"Holmer-san! I'm so glad! I'm so glaaad!" Fresa sobbed.

"Fresa? What happened? Is this thanks to your apple magic?" Holmer said.

Holmer's arm stopped bleeding, but it still looks like it hurts. In my case, if I got any of my body parts hacked off, I'd be able to heal back to normal. Not like I have any, though.

Ding Ding! "Thank you for always using the blessing card's services."

I just got another announcement! I've never gotten one from the "blessing" card.

It's thanks to this blessing card that I don't have to worry about stuff like that. I could get a leg blown apart or my head lopped off, but I'd still heal, good as new.

"We would like to tell you some very important and useful information, limited to blessing card users only."

What the heck? This feels like some "confidential" spam email that you get from companies every now and then.

"It's very rare for a user to become a fruit. [Insert name here] Furutsu-sama, we believe we can provide very useful information for your eyes only. Please consider this excellent opportunity. A person in charge will contact you within a few days."

That sounds so suspicious! It's practically a template email! They even left in [insert name here]! Who's this "person in charge" anyways?

"That would be me. Would you be able to spare some time?" a voice suddenly said.

Whoa! You surprised me! Oh my god, are you the person in charge?!

"Pardon me. Is there a Furutsu-sama here?"

This is he.

"Ah, excuse me! Thank you for using our company's card!"

Company? Wait, am I being recruited into something?

“No, not at all. Well, let me see... First, we need to confirm your identity. Would you kindly provide your date of birth, address, and phone number?”

I’ve hung up on these types of calls. It makes me want to yell, “You called me! Why do you need my phone number?”

“Sir?”

Yeah, hi! I took some time to think it over. Uh, okay. So I was born in 19...no, wait, I reincarnated five days ago, so maybe that’s my birth date? I don’t have an address or phone number.

“Okay, please give me a moment while I confirm.”

What can you even confirm with that?

“Ah, Furutsu-sama, so you were an apple! That’s rather rare for one of our customers.”

Wait, does that imply there’s actually other apples out there?!

“Uh, excuse me. We have a confidentiality agreement with our customers.”

*Then why’d you say it?! See, **now** I’m curious! Also, what do you mean “rather” rare?! I stopped to pant and catch my breath. Okay, um, so, what is it?*

“Ah, yes, while you’re using the blessing card, there’s a very convenient membership plan available for your consideration.”

“Available for my consideration?” I know you’re being polite, but that’s kind of annoying.

“Allow me to provide you with the details. As you are an edible foodstuff, you are always at risk of being eaten. This is especially true for apples—eighty-six percent of apple deaths are from being eaten. This is the unfortunate reality that we’ve found through our research.”

Well yeah, we’re apples. It’s not exactly unfortunate for an apple to get eaten. So what’s the issue?

“Oh, the plan I’m about to explain has nothing to do with this statistic.”

Stop making me uneasy with small talk! Just tell me what you want!

“Ahem. Pardon me, I’ll stop beating around the bush. The blessing card has a special service wherein you may share your regenerative abilities with whomever consumes a part of you.”

What?

“Once you say ‘I’ll bless you,’ and have your target consume a part of you, the target will be fully healed. This includes regenerating lost body parts, curing poison, regenerating their mana, protecting their family, increasing business sales, praying for a safe childbirth, and myriad other good fortunes.”

I didn’t know those last few were blessings you could even get. That last one was just a prayer.

“However, the part that has been consumed will not regenerate

until the target has digested and fully absorbed the power. For you, sir, losing a part of your body might resemble a certain famous tech company's logo, and that might infringe on certain copyright laws..."

Ahhh! Shh! I can't hear you! Stop! Don't worry about the small stuff. We can just ask the editor to not publish that scene, okay?

"Editor? Publish?" Grida asked.

It's nothing. Don't worry about it. In any case, a bite will be taken out of me until I'm fully digested?

"Correct. If you have pain receptors, you will also feel some pain."

Damn! This is gonna hurt! I don't want that...but I guess I've gotta suck it up. I promised to protect them.

"Furutsu, I'm the only one that heard that line, you know?" Grida said.

I don't want you to see me as a liar. You're my best partner, after all.

"Ack, F-Furutsu..."

"Now then, Furutsu-sama. Shall I add this ability to the blessing card?" the voice asked.

Yes, please.

"Very well. We hope you continue using the blessing card!"

Ding Ding! "The transfer ability has been added to the blessing card. Please use this ability with care."

Ugh, that was an unpleasant exchange from start to finish. What's the deal with that card? Anyways, if something goes wrong, I'll file a claim at the customer support center. So I've just gotta say the words, right? I'll bless you.

Ding Ding! "The transfer ability from the blessing card will be activated. 3...2...1... Preparation complete. Please be consumed."

Ugh, this announcement sucks. Anyways, eat me! Go crunch! Come on! Don't be shy!

"Uh, Fresa? Why did you put this apple in my hand?" Holmer asked.

"Huuuh? Little apple?" Fresa said.

What are you waiting for? Come on, don't hold back!

"Furutsu..." Grida started.

Hm? What's up? We're in the middle of a meal here. Well, I'm the meal, actually.

"Aha ha ha. Ummm...you really do look delicious, but..."

But?

"I don't think anyone will try to eat an apple that just killed some really tough ants and then brought a man back from the brink of death."

Oh, good point. Wait, what now? He'll never eat it. If it were me, I'd put a scary-yet-helpful-but-still-kind-of-scary apple on an altar and pray to it.

“What...should I do with this?” Holmer asked.

Fresa pondered this for a moment. “Who knows?”

“What? Fresa, aren’t you controlling it?”

“No, this apple moves on its ooown. So I think this also has some sort of meaning.”

Even Fresa won’t realize that this apple wants to be eaten. What should I do?

“If only you could just tell them ‘please eat me!’” Grida said.

Yeah, but we can’t talk. How can I convey my thoughts? I’d love to do some sort of gesture, but it’s kinda hard without hands or legs.

“Oh, Furutsu! How about you use this?”

Oh! Great idea! Nice job, Grida, you genius!

“Eheh heh, you praised me again!”

Grida took out Fresa’s plate, fork, and knife from the storage card.

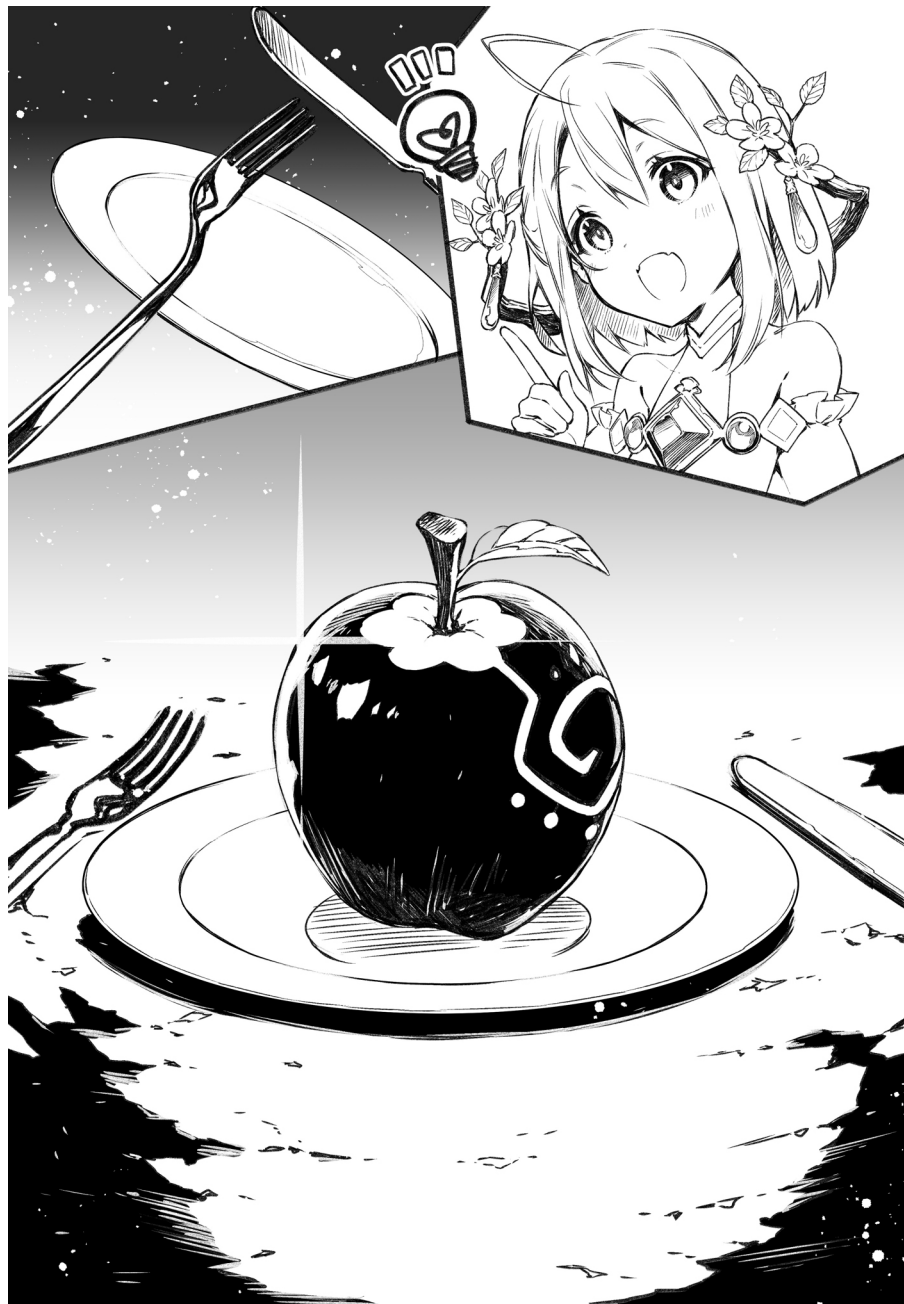
“What’s it doing now?” Holmer asked.

“A plate?”

I jumped off of Holmer’s hand and rolled on the ground. Then, while considering the most appetizing angle, I rolled onto the plate.

You gotta feast with your eyes too. I’ll offer myself, with love.

The fork and knife were arranged on either side of the plate.



“Fresa, is this apple...?” Holmer asked.

“It looks like it wants you to eat it,” she replied.

I’m glad you guys understand. Grida, could you clean up the plates? I don’t want to be eaten all fancy-like with silverware. I just want him to take a big old crunch out of me with a flourish.

“Okay, but you sure seem particular about it!” Grida said.

I placed myself in Holmer’s hand.

Come on, just take a big bite!

“I don’t really understand what’s happening, but here goes,” Holmer said, with more than a little uncertainty.

“There must be some kind of reason for this!” Fresa said.

Holmer gulped, and carefully took a bite out of me.

Huh?! AAAAAAHHHH! Owwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

I couldn’t stop rolling. *It hurts! Damn, this huuuurts!*

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

“F-Furutsu?” Grida said.

What the heck? Owwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

Ow! Ow! Ow! Owwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

“Little apple...did that hurt?!” Fresa said.

Gaaaaaaah!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

The word “pain” doesn’t even begin to describe it! It’s totally different from getting bruised or smacked around!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

Ahhhhhhh! I’m gonna die! I think I’m gonna die!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

Th-This is gonna last until Holmer fully digests me, right?

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

Ow! Ow! Ow! I really don’t think I’m gonna make it!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

I kept rolling around on the floor in agony.

“Ugh! Urrgh!” Holmer started groaning, paying me no attention. His eyes rolled back into his head as he started trembling.

“Holmer-san? Little apple? What’s going on?” Fresa said, sounding panicked.

Owwww! Aaaaagh!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

“Uuugh! Ghh... Gaaah...”

Aaaaah! Auuugh!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

“Little apple! Holmer-san! What should I dooo?!” Fresa cried.
Holmer’s eyes flew open as he looked at Fresa. “Uuuugh!
Yuh...yuh...y...um.”

“Yum?”

Holmer was grinning from ear to ear. “This is delicious! What in the world?! I’ve never eaten an apple this good!”

Owwwww! Owwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

I-I’m glad, but awwwwwwwww!

Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll! Roll!

I’m in a lot of pain here! Aaaaaah!

“More...”

Ow! Ow! Huh?

“Let me eat more...” Holmer mumbled, inching towards me.

Huh? Wait, what? Hey, hold on a second!

“Just one more bite! Please! A little nibble!” He reached for me.

Nooooo! Stoooooop!

“Holmer-san! Nooo!” Fresa screamed. Close call. She picked me up and held me close.

Ow. Ow. Ow... She saved me! Another bite, and I seriously would’ve lost it!

“Fre...sa? Please, one more bite... Please,” Holmer said as inched closer.

“No! It really looks like it’s in pain! Look at how this poor thing’s trembling,” Fresa said, walking backwards.

I shuddered. *Please, no more! Don’t eat me! Don’t chomp on me!*

“Give. Me. That. Apple! It’s mine...” Holmer’s bloodshot eyes were laser-focused on me.

“Holmer-san? Y-You’re acting weeeird. This isn’t like you!”

No! Stop! Don’t eat me! Ow! Ow! Ow! I’m shaking in my metaphorical boots here!

“Let me eat that apple!” Holmer roared as he pounced on us.

“Nooooo!” Fresa cried, shielding me with her body.

Ding Ding! I heard another announcement. “The piece you have transferred has been digested and absorbed.”

The pain subsided, and the bitten area started to regenerate.

“Wh-What was I doing?” Holmer said.

That was close! It seemed like Holmer was back to his normal self. In the next moment, a bright light surrounded him.

Ding Ding! “Successfully transferred. The effect of the blessing card will now activate.”

“Whoa, my arm?!” Holmer’s missing left arm started to regenerate right in front of us.

*So **this** is a transfer!*

“Is it because you ate the apple?” Fresa said in disbelief.

That’s right. The blessing card will turn your arm back to normal.

Huh? Wait. What?

“M-My hair! And my teeth?!” Holmer yelled.

Holmer’s hair and beard are falling out?! And his teeth too! Wait!

Stop! What’s going on?

Ding Ding! “Thank you for your continued use of the blessing card.”

Oh? An announcement from the card?

“I’m terribly sorry. I had forgotten to tell you a few other warnings when we talked the other day.”

The other day? We talked, like, ten seconds ago! Also, what warnings?

“Firstly, the pain you will feel from transferring will be magnified by ten to several hundred times.”

Really? No wonder it hurt so much. You should’ve told me!

“Secondly, the target that received the ‘transfer’ from you will lose their sense of self for a short time until you’ve been completely absorbed. They will also try to forcibly eat more of you, so please be careful.”

So that’s what happened to Holmer! I thought I was getting hunted down by a zombie! Jeez, that’s risky. I can’t use this ability on a whim.

“Thirdly...”

There’s still more?

“Those that receive your transfer will revert to their most healthy and ‘prime’ state. In other words, if a human were to receive your transfer, their physical body would revert to its early twenties.”

Say what?

“Holmer-san?! What’s going on?” Fresa cried.

“Their physical capabilities and knowledge will not be lost. Also, should your target be extremely young, they will not be aged forward, so to speak. Please do not worry about that.”

Holmer’s white hair turned a silky brown. His old battered teeth fell out and were quickly replaced with the pearly whites from his youth. His wrinkles followed suit, and his skin appeared to have a healthier glow.

“Furutsu! Look at him!” Grida cried.

“Are you really Holmer-san?” Fresa cautiously asked.

In an instant, a man in his forties transformed into a handsome twentysomething gentleman.

H-How do we explain this to the others?!

“Amaaazing! Holmer-san looks so young!” Grida exclaimed.

I really am a forbidden fruit! If people find out that a bite of me can make them younger, it’ll be pure chaos out there!

“They’ll chase you down and eat you...” Grida drew a sharp

breath with a faint “eek.”

You’re exactly right, that would be terrible. I have to meet the World Tree and get you out of storage, Grida. We’ve gotta get moving here!

“Fresa, you mustn’t tell anyone about this. Do you understand?” Holmer asked firmly.

“Of course. I wasn’t planning on it,” she replied.

Huh?

“Then the biggest problem would be my appearance. Hmmm...” Holmer studied himself in a mirror lit by a portable lantern, deep in thought.

“I agree. You’re not supposed to look this goooood.”

“Hey, I’ll take the compliment, but I didn’t look that bad before, did I?”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you say,” Fresa giggled. She looked at me. “Apple-san, you looked like you were in so much pain. You were practically writhing around on the ground, and yet you saved Holmer-san anyway. I’ll definitely protect you!”

“Yeah. I’ve got to repay my debt to that apple. It saved my life, after all,” Holmer agreed.

Are these two really not planning to use me for any dastardly plans?

“All right, then! Let’s just say I died here.”

“Whaaat?! Holmer-san?!”

“I mean, look at me. I look way too young. If I were to come back to the city claiming to be Holmer, everyone would panic.”

True. He looks so different that he only sort of resembles the old Holmer.

“I don’t even know how to explain this to the guild. An ‘I don’t know’ won’t cut it. Getting younger isn’t something we can just handwave away—worst case, they might use me for some sort of experiment.”

“You’re right. That probably wouldn’t end well for you,” said Fresa.

I’m not familiar with this world, but I can only assume that all worlds are in the same boat here. Those in power usually go nuts over eternal youth, immortality, or de-aging. If they find out about me, I don’t know what will happen!

“So Holmer died here! Judging from this devastating situation, I don’t think we’d need much in the way of proof. We can use my severed arm to show folks that I’m dead.”

“Good point. Elumichai-san took it, so it’s probably going straight to the guild,” Fresa added.

“I see. That’d be a good thing to bury for my grave. Maybe I’ll leave some flowers!” Holmer said, laughing. His belly laugh seemed unfitting for a man that young, and Fresa smiled at him.

Holmer, I'm sorry that you had to reset your life because of me.

"Oh? What's this?" he asked.

I rolled off of Fresa's hand and started to roll around the two of them.

I can't talk, so I don't know any other way to express myself.

Holmer laughed. "Hah, that goes both ways, buddy! Thanks for saving me!"

"Apple-san, I truly cannot thank you enough. Please keep watching over us, okay?" Fresa said, wiping her tears.

I'm glad they seem to understand me.

"Well then, from today on, I'll call myself Datil."

"Datil?"

"Yup. The only people aside from us that could connect me to that guy are all dead. Do you think it's a bad idea?"

"No. I think Datil would be very happy to hear it."

Who's Datil? I'm a bit curious about that.

"One more thing. You don't have to sound so polite around me. Relax a little, okay?"

"Huh? Can I do thaaat?"

You can. Oddly enough, once you drop the formality, you can never go back. Source: me, when I was demoted at my company back on Earth. All my former subordinates quit being polite to me sooner or later.

"All right, then it's settled. My name is Datil. I'm a handsome swordsman that lost some of my memories after having a terrible time with the ants."

Fresa chuckled. "Did you just call yourself handsome, sir? Oh, whoops, I forgot about the casual thing already! Come to think of it, it's pretty unfair if I'm the only one changing how I talk, don't you thiiiink? How about you show me some respect? How's that?"

Huh, not a bad idea.

"Wh-What? Fresa, don't go deciding these things on your own."

"Datil, I saved your life moments ago. I'm your savior. Now, try calling me 'Fresa-san,' okaaay?" Fresa grinned happily.

"Ugh. F-Fresa-san," Holmer, now Datil, mumbled with a grimace.

"A-Are you happy now? I mean, I hope you're pleased with this, F-Fresa-san."

"Yup! That's the spirit, Datil!"

It seemed like this was going to be a whole process for Datil, but Fresa slipped right into this new relationship dynamic without issue.

Why does she look so happy?

"All right, then let's go!" Fresa said, pointing in the opposite direction from where we arrived. She confidently set off deeper into the passageway.

"Huh?" Datil and I said in unison. "Wait, wait! Where the heck are

you going, Fresa?!”

Fresa stopped in her tracks and turned around. With a smile on her face, she cocked her head sideways. “Datil? I saved your life, remember?”

“Aaaagh! Okay, okay! Where might you be headed, Fresa-san?” Datil said, looking a little annoyed.

Fresa grinned. “We’re going to defeat all the ants in heeere!”
Huuuh?! Is she serious?!

“Y-You don’t mean...” Datil couldn’t hide his surprise. “Fresa...uh, Fresa-san. Perhaps that’s rather much.”

Fresa shook her head. “I think that signpost was right after all. The monster that annihilated a whole country came from here! If we just let this go, this entire region might get destroyed!”

Good going, Fresa. You’re exactly right. These ants most likely emerged from the Chasm of Catastrophe a long time ago. After devouring everyone in the area, they went back to sleep. Once they realize that the humans repopulated, it’s only a matter of time before they start their rampage.

“But Fresa...um, Fresa-san. There’s simply too many of them.”

“I do think this apple magic can help us.”

Yeah, I agree, and I’m not trying to sound egotistical here. My magic is pretty dang strong, and your magic is probably even more powerful, Grida.

“M-Mine is?” Grida said.

Yup. If I’m correct, your magic can easily destroy thousands of those ants. Maybe even tens of thousands.

“Y-You think so?”

But I think my magic is enough for this ant colony. Don’t you worry about it.

“Are you sure? Can you really kill all these ants?” Datil asked.

“Apple-san, if you think you can do it, roll around me. If not, roll around Datil, please.”

I rolled around Fresa. If I didn’t do anything, more people were gonna get eaten. Grida and I were the only ones who could handle this situation right now.

“See? With this apple by our side, it’ll be a ciiinch!” Fresa crowed with delight.

Well, I can’t guarantee an easy victory here. I don’t know how big the colony is, not to mention its actual physical size. Don’t overestimate me. Also, I’m sorry, Grida.

“Huh? Why are you apologizing?” Grida asked.

Well, our goal was to meet the World Tree. I’m sorry I got so sidetracked here.

“Furutsu, thank you.”

Ah ha ha, no worries. Anyways, I’m sure we can easily crush this ant

colony together.

“Yeah! Let’s beat ‘em all!”

Right, one more thing before we get started.

“And what’s that?”

Yeah, this is necessary for the future. Grida, do you remember the announcement from the magician card about the safety settings?

“Um, the one about how ‘users and those that make direct contact with the user’ can change the settings, right?”

Yup, that one. That setting is probably there so that we don’t involve innocent bystanders or our allies. Fresa’s physically touching me, so she’s probably safe from our magic, but...

“Ah, I see! Holmer-san...I mean, Datil-san isn’t making direct contact with you, so he might be in danger!”

Exactly. When I was attacking multiple targets before, there was a red check mark on Holmer. That means I could accidentally attack a friend.

“That’s dangerous! What should we do?”

That safety setting might be a clue in protecting him. I don’t really know how it works though.

“Hmmm, should we try talking directly to the card?”

That could work. Uhhh, testing, testing. Can anyone hear me? I want to fiddle with the safety settings on the magician card.

“Card-san, can you hear us?”

Heed mine words, magician card! Grant me the power to control thy safety settings!

“Magician, come on out! Let’s play!”

Hm. Nothing.

“There’s no response.”

Safety setting Datil! Safety setting Fresa! Uh, safety setting Holmer!

“Please make it so that our magic won’t hit Fresa-san or Datil-san!”

Not a peep. We’re not doing this right.

“Hmmm... What else can we do?”

We need the instruction manual or something. My magic is powerful, and yours is even stronger—we could destroy those tough-looking ants in an instant. If our magic even grazes a human, they’d be seriously injured. If we’re in a hectic fight like last time, we might accidentally hit them. We need to keep them safe.

“What can we do to make the magician card respond to us?”

It occasionally reacts to me, but if I can’t control it directly, this will only keep causing problems.

“Furutsu, if you don’t hurry, Fresa-san and the others will go on ahead!”

They seem to be waiting for me, so they probably won’t leave me behind. Hmmm. I feel like the Cards of Fate are triggered by my actions

somehow. Wait, how about I try activating the safety setting on myself?

“What do you mean?”

It's supposed to be protecting me, right? So what happens if I try to attack myself?

“But that's dangerous!”

It should be fine. If this setting really is to protect us, I'm the user, and obviously I'm in direct contact with myself, so I should be safe! I think. I hope. Okay...Grida, try attacking me with your magic. But I'm scared, so keep it at one percent of your full strength, please.

“Huh? Are you sure?”

Yeah. Worst case, I've got the blessing card on my side. I should be able to regenerate even if you blow me to bits.

“Hmmm. I don't want to blow you up, but here goes nothing!”

Come at me!

“Strength at one percent! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!”

Bzzzt! “Subject is not targetable due to safety settings. To remove this restriction, please access the settings panel of your magician card.”

“Phew. I'm glad my spell didn't activate,” Grida said, breathing a sigh of relief.

Thanks for worrying about me.

“Did anything happen?”

Uh, I was just told to access the settings panel of the magician card.

Ding! “You have accessed the settings panel of the magician card.”

It was that easy?

“Wow! I'm glad we got it though!” Grida said.

A translucent panel appeared in front of me. It seems like a touch panel, but can I still use it without hands? Uh, let's see. List of spells, safety settings, default strength setting, magic analysis, magic creation. There's a lot of settings here, but I need to find the safety settings.

Ding! “Safety settings.”

Oh, looks like I can control this verbally. Well, telepathically, in my case. Thank goodness. Okay, so we have: safety settings list, add to all lists, remove from all lists, settings for each spell, advanced settings. I'll select “add to all lists.”

Ding! “You can add a subject to this list. Please focus on your subject within this panel.”

A cross-shaped cursor appeared in the middle of the panel. I see. So I just have put Datil here.

Ding! “Target selected. Will you add ‘Datil’ to your list? Y/N.”

Oh? It's going with Datil instead of Holmer? I wonder how this works. Uh, yes.

Ding! “Datil has been added to all lists in the safety settings. You

have 99 slots remaining.”

Huh, so there's a limit to the people I can add. Well, I probably won't need to add that many people anyways. Let's add Fresa while we're at it, just in case.

“Fresa has been added to all lists in the safety settings. You have 98 slots remaining.”

Okay, good. Let's go kill some ants!

“Furutsu, wait a second,” Grida said.

What's wrong?

“Um, that added them to the safety list for the water spell too. Do we want that?”

Oh, right! Healing spells might have adverse effects, so they still have safety settings! We definitely want to be able to heal them, yeah, so let's take them off there. Uh, I think “settings for each spell” is the way to go. Oh, found it! Okay, remove “Datil” and “Fresa” from water magic. There, all set!

“So it'll protect Datil-san and Fresa-san now, right?”

Yep. Just...like...this! Strength at two percent; remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

“Apple-san?!”

“Wh-What's going on?!”

Fifty-six of my fireballs flew straight up to the roof, killing the ants that were quietly scuttling above us.

“Heh heh, so you noticed those ants too!” Grida giggled.

Yup. You realized it too, huh? Those ants are trying to be all sneaky!

“When did they get that close?!” Datil yelled in surprise as he saw the ants tumble from the ceiling.

“Th-That surprised meee! It looked like Apple-san's spells went right through us though?” Fresa said.

My spells didn't hit them thanks to the safety settings. All right! Let's kill those ants!

More ants started pouring out of a passageway that led to a small room.

“Apple fire magic!” Fresa yelled, raising me high into the air.

Ah, yeah, no problem.

“Strength at one percent; remove the shackles of fire, traveler,” Grida chanted.

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Spell will fire at multiple targets. Strength is at one percent.” With a loud whoosh, Grida's spell eradicated all of those tough-looking ants. I heard an announcement that my remaining mana was at twenty percent, so I decided to take a break.

“Seems like this room is cleear.”

“Fresa-san, please don’t go off by yourself, okay?”

I’m finally getting used to their conversation with their roles reversed.

“Heh heh, Fresa-san and Datil-san make a good pair!” Grida said.

I agree. They’re great at combo attacks, and they work together well in tight situations.

“What? That’s not what I mean, Furutsu...”

Grida, watch out! Behind us!

“Hmmm. Well, okay. Roger that!”

We proceeded deeper inside the passageway that the jerk trio from earlier discovered. This whole ordeal seemed to have started from that room. Along the way, we found another small room and extensively searched it.

“Furutsu, I think we collected everything we could from here,” Grida said.

Okay then! Let’s take the next room for 500, Alex! Well, not like Fresa and Datil can hear me though. Grida, you missed one!

“Ah, you’re right! Hiyah!”

I collected anything and everything I could: the items that the ants’ victims left behind, the ant corpses, and all the different ores that started to turn up more frequently as we ventured deeper inside. I stuffed them all into the storage card.

“Hmmm, what are those glittering things that Apple-san’s collecting?” Fresa asked, her head cocked to one side.

“Do you not know anything at all? I mean, Fresa-san, were your studies truly so lacking?” Datil said.

“Datiil? Rephrasing that sounds like you made fun of me twice. If you’re going to mock me, do it in one go.”

“Fresa-san, were they truly so lacking?”

“Why did you just say it again?!”

“Those stones are some kind of ore. I’m hardly a mining expert, but the ants must’ve dug these up while creating their colony, and gathered it into one place.”

“Huh, ores. Okay.”

It looked as though the ants had found an ore vein while digging deeper inside. There was quite a lot of it, piled up all around the room.

Maybe the ants instinctively pile things up.

“It looks like some of this ore is pretty rare, so we should collect anything we can,” Grida said.

Honestly, I’m not sure if all of this stuff would come in handy though. Especially the ant corpses.

“Huh? Then why are you collecting them?”

Because if people come back and find all these bodies, they’ll think that Fresa defeated them all. She’ll stand out way too much.

“Is that a problem? Everyone will just think she’s amazing.”

No, she’ll be a little too amazing. These ants can sink an entire country. If she kills them all, people will start to think that Fresa can single-handedly wipe out a nation.

“Oh, that’s not good!”

Yeah. People will definitely be paying attention to the apple magic user. Of course, Datil and I—the actual source of the apple magic—are gonna stand out too.

“I see! So that’s why you’re cleaning up!”

Yeah. The storage card has unlimited space, and the bodies won’t deteriorate while they’re in there. We can take maybe one or two ants out at a time so that we can sell ’em without raising suspicion.

“You’re going to sell them?”

Sure am. I heard that the items you can create from monster corpses can sell for a high price. I’m not sure how much these ants will go for, but I might as well collect them all. Also, I’m sorry, but I won’t be picking up any human remains. I’d love to bring them back and have them properly cremated or something, but there’s just way too many of them. I can’t keep up.

“Those poor people...”

That’s kind of you, Grida. In any case, once the ants are gone, this place will be a bit safer. Oh, hey, check out that wall! It looks kind of weird.

“Yeah, there’s a room over there.”

Great. Fresa and company don’t seem to be aware, so could you destroy that wall for me?

“Okaaaay!”

I didn’t think the colony was this big. If we’d left this alone, I really think this country would’ve been devoured.

“There really are a lot of ants, aren’t there?”

Yeah. This seems endless.

As far as I could gather, the map of the third floor wasn’t complete, and was missing a good number of rooms. We found fewer items from small rooms, and more ants instead.

“Hey, look, they’re still sleeping in this one,” Grida said.

Sometimes we get lucky, and the ants in a room are still asleep when we show up. Maybe it’s because we’re going deeper inside.

“Please wait here,” Datil whispered to Fresa, stopping her from advancing. He slowly made his way towards the sleeping ants.

One stab between the eyes per ant was all it took. It seemed we were correct in taking action quickly.

It might seem a bit unfair, but the ideal situation would be to kill them

all while they're asleep.

"Why would that be unfair?" Grida asked.

It's a bit inhumane to attack things that can't fight back, don't you think?

"But you're an apple. What's the problem?"

Good point! Ha ha ha! You're right! There are no rules for battles between apples and ants! No point in chivalry or sportsmanship here.

"But how are these bast—I mean, monsters asleep?" Datil asked.

You gotta work on sounding more polite.

"Hmmm, maybe it's some sorta magic?" Fresa sounded completely relaxed. She most likely wasn't used to talking so politely and preferred a more casual conversation.

"If so, that might be a problem."

Those bugs use magic? That sounds unlikely.

Grida giggled. "We can use magic too. That's also pretty unlikely."

Fair point. If a staff and an apple can use magic, why not bugs?

"Okay, this should be all. Could you please collect these, Fresa-san?"

Ant corpses were strewn across the ground, all with a single hole between their eyes. For whatever reason, if we didn't directly touch these ants, they wouldn't wake up—even if other ants were making noise or scuttling around.

"Do you think they're under some spell?" Grida asked.

Probably. Wait, wouldn't that mean that there are special ants that wake them up and put them to sleep?

"Furutsu! One's coming from the outside!"

Grida, get 'em!

"Okaaaay! One percent; remove the shackle of fire, traveler!"

Ding! "Confirmed activation of spell. Strength is at one percent."

Fresa and Datil turned to look backwards when they heard the loud whoosh of the flames.

"Apple-san?!"

"An enemy?"

We heard a loud thud, confirming that our spell made contact. It lit up the dark passageway.

Good shot.

Ring! Ring! "Warning! Magic spell has been resisted." The announcement echoed in my head.

"Huh?" Grida said.

Resist magic?! Was your spell blocked?!

"Furutsu, look!"

Seriously? I knew there were a lot of them, but this is...

"I knew it. Please stay back!" Datil said with a sword in hand. He stood in front of Fresa and signaled with his left hand for us to stay

low.

“I-Is that...?” Fresa lit the way from behind him, trying to confirm the number of enemies.

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “magician’s weapon”? Do you imagine a big brown staff carried by a wizard with a long white beard? Or maybe a small wand, like you’d see from a conductor in an orchestra? Maybe it’s one of those shiny black wands a stage magician might tap the top of a silk hat with. I’m sure every person has a different idea.

“Heh heh. And then there’s someone like me!” Grida added.

Exactly. You can’t forget a staff decorated with a large jewel or a crystal ball. But out of all those, your staff is the prettiest and most heavenly, Grida.

“That makes me so happy! You’re the coolest apple in the world!”

Ha ha ha! You think? You make me happy too. Anyways, back to what I was saying. The ant in front of us is carrying a large, clunky-looking staff. It must be a mage, and honestly kinda looks the part.



“That doesn’t look like a club, does it?” Datil asked.

“I would be surprised if it waaas. That’s definitely a magician’s staff,” Fresa replied.

None of the ants had any equipment before. I would have been freaked out if one of them came at us with a stick, even, but this one’s probably a bigger problem. Not only does it have what looks like a magician’s staff, it also seems to have resisted our magic. It’s not like any of the ants we’ve faced.

“What does it mean by resisting our magic?” Grida asked.

It means that it tanked or repelled it, I guess.

“Fresa-san, the apple magic hit the target, didn’t it?” Datil asked.

“Yes, it did seem that way. But the ant looks uninjured... Did that spell really have no effeeect?!”

As far as I know, “resisting” basically just means negating the attack. Or at least, from the games and books I’ve read, that’s what I think it means. I never thought I’d ever be in this situation.

“So, my magic basically didn’t happen?” Grida said glumly.

Don’t you worry about that. You only used one percent of your total power. But we also shouldn’t let our guard down. Your one percent is basically my ten percent.

“Oh, so I should just use more of my power! Let me try!”

Waaaaaaait! Wait! Wait! Stop!

“Huh? Why?”

Your magic is powerful. If your spell happens to hit a wall or the ceiling, we might all get buried alive!

“Oh, that makes sense. So that’s why we’ve only been using one percent of our power. You’re so smart!”

I don’t know what percentage of our strength we need to use on that ant, but at any rate your magic is too strong for us to risk it.

“That’s scary. This might end up really bad!”

Yeah. Any more power, and we might bury ourselves alive. I’d have to wait until I sprout, and by the time that happens, the humans might all be devoured. How should we go about this? Should I use physical attacks?

“Urgh. I was a bit late,” came a sudden voice.

Hm?

“To think everyone died before I woke them up... Are the soldiers in the other rooms dead as well? I should hurry and report this to the queen.”

Hmmm?

“Now that I think about it, I can handle this myself if I only have to deal with these two intruders. I’ll kill them off before the destruction spreads, and file the report after.”

Grida, did you hear that?

“All I hear is that weird squeaking from the ants.”

So I'm the only one that can hear it?

“How did those two make it this far? I usually have soldiers guarding this area,” said an ant.

“See? I can only hear them squeaking,” Grida said.

I guess they only sound like insect noises to you. Oh, right! My automatic translation translated their noises for me!

I heard a chant. “The roots of the wheat, the sounds of the rain, and the ocean of stars hold thirty-six keys.”

Huh? I don't understand what they're saying all of a sudden.

“The master of the mountain is not here. The master of the land is not here.”

What's going on? Hold on, a string of strange words in a row? Is this some kind of...?

“Dig your claws into the walls of the Abyss. Make haste, master of the darkness.”

It's chanting some kind of spell!

“Dark magic, sleep.”

A dark wave of magic was expelled from the tip of the staff, enveloping its surroundings. Fresa and Datil both yelled in surprise.

This is bad! We all got hit by that magic!

“Is this sleep-inducing magic?” Datil said.

“I can't...keep my eyes opeeen,” murmured Fresa.

That's bad! We'll all fall asleep at this rate! What should I do? If I'd noticed that the chanting was some sort of spell, I could've prevented this!

“Furutsu!” Grida said.

Fresa fell to her knees, and Datil followed shortly after. I fell from Fresa's hands and rolled towards the wall as the two passed out.

“Hey, Furutsu!”

Grida. Don't you...fall asleep. It'll be over for us...

“We're plants. We don't get sleepy.”

Huh? Oh, yeah. Now that you mention it, I guess I don't actually feel very sleepy.

“Furutsu!”

Ding Ding! “Detected ‘an unknown spell’ and ‘activation of magic.’ This will be registered in the magician card.”

Huh?! Is this that monster's spell?

Bzzt! “An error has occurred. Analysis starting.”

Yeah, I didn't think things were that simple. Anyways, I gotta do something about this situation. If I touch Fresa and Datil like those ants, will they wake up? I'll use my ultra powerful—I mean, my extra super weak tackle to wake them up. I don't want to kill them accidentally! Here goes!

Roll. Roll. Roll.

“Huh? What’s going on? Is that fruit rolling on its own?” one of the ants said.

Tsk! They noticed me. Whatever. I just need to wake those two up!

Roll. Roll. Roll.

Wake up, Fresia! Extra super weak tackle attack!

Bump.

“Furutsu, she’s not waking up! Why?!” Grida cried.

She’s a deep sleeper, maybe? Datil, wake up! Extra super weak tackle!

Bump!

Whoops, that might’ve been a little too hard. But they’re still not waking up! Why?

“A fruit moving on its own? What’s going on here?” another ant said.

Are they using a different kind of magic? The one that put the ants to sleep and this one are totally different!

“That apple seems to have a mind of its own. Destroy it first.”

Damn, they’re perceptive! This isn’t good, they’re coming closer. What now? Do I go all or nothing and try out a powerful spell?

Ding Ding! “The unknown spell has been successfully analyzed. A few problems relating to a different type of curse magic have been identified.”

Did that come from the magician card? Was it still analyzing the spell? Whatever, now’s not the time for this!

Ding Ding! “Problems have been identified and are ready to be resolved.”

Ding! “Three potential traps regarding pronunciation of spell that may trigger a spell malfunction.”

Ding! “Four potential traps regarding misplacement of words and letters that may cause the user to be cursed to death.”

Ding! “Four potential traps regarding purposefully using the spell in a forbidden manner that may cause the user’s mana to overflow.”

Ding Ding! “A total of eleven effects that may be malicious towards the user have been identified. Would you like for these to be resolved now? Y/N.”

I can resolve errors? I didn’t know that! That sounded really bad, but I’ll probably be okay, right?

“Furutsu, what does that ‘eleven malicious effects’ bit mean?”

Hmmm. I’m not sure, but I think that if I try to use the ant’s spell against them, I’ll activate eleven traps that’ll probably kill me eleven times over.

“Huh? That’s scary!”

I agree. It’s a bit weird, but I’ll trust the magician card and choose “yes.” It might help us get through this.

Ding Ding! “Successfully registered. Users will be ‘Furutsu’ and

‘Grida.’ Default strength is at fifty percent. Safety settings include the user, those in direct contact with the user, and [002] other listed entities.”

Okay, good. The two on the list must be Fresa and Datil. That auto-add is pretty convenient.

Ding Ding! “Spell has been successfully analyzed. Spell has been abbreviated for efficiency. Incantation will now be: ‘Darkness from below will desire the Heavens.’ As the spell has been made more effective and powerful, default strength will be set at five percent.”

As usual, the abbreviated spell uses the long original incantation as a base. Judging from the change in percentage, this efficiency change increases the power tenfold. I can only hope that those “errors” got resolved.

A triumphant trumpet sound echoed. **Doot doo doo doooooot!** “Congratulations. You have gained a bonus because you discovered a new type of spell. Details can be found in the ‘After Discovering an Ability’ section.”

Oh, really? I heard that fanfare before when I got a bonus from the power card!

“Hooray!” Grida said.

Yeah, I think I’m really lucky here! I wonder what kinda bonus it was?

“Ugh... Oh no! Was I asleep?!” Datil said as he got back up.

“Huh?! Apple-san, where are you?!” Fresa said, glancing around.

Oooh?! Did those two wake up?

“That was close. I’m glad they both woke up already,” Grida said.

But why? Did the spell wear off?

“Hm? Why are they awake? That was far too quick,” the ant said with surprise. “I suppose these humans have ‘divine protection’ or some sort of resistance. It’s no wonder they made it this far.”

Wait, could it be? If so, this magician card is seriously amazing!

“The roots of the wheat, the sounds of the rain, and the ocean of stars hold thirty-six keys. The master of the mountain is not here. The master of the land is not here. Dig your claws into the walls of the Abyss. Make haste, master of the darkness,” the ant chanted.

That was quick! It thought it was doing a tongue twister or something!

“Furutsu, this is no time to be impressed! They’ll go back to sleep again!” Grida cried.

A dark light gathered towards the end of the ant’s staff. It was most likely using the same magic it used before.

Okay, this’ll be an experiment then.

“Furutsu!”

Just sit back and watch, Grida.

“Dark magic, sleep,” the ant murmured as a wave of dark light burst from its staff.

“Furutsu! They’re gonna fall asleep again!” Grida shouted. There was a brief pause. “Wait, h-huh?!”

The dark wave surged forward, but went around Fresa and Datil.

“What?! What’s going on?!” Datil said.

“Wow! This looks like a resist effeeect!” Fresa said.

Boy, do those two look surprised.

“What happened? Why are they safe?” Grida asked.

Probably thanks to the safety settings. I thought it was just to prevent friendly fire, so that we wouldn’t accidentally hit them with our own spells, but apparently not!

“You mean it doesn’t matter who casts the spell? Those two are immune?”

That’s right! The safety settings will always negate the effect of the spell, no matter who casts it. That’s why they woke up the moment we registered them into the safety list!

“That’s amazing! Wait, that means...”

So you put it together? That’s the Grida I know! That means every single spell I learn won’t work on those two. It’s almost too broken of an ability, huh?

“What’s going on?! My spell isn’t working!” cried the ant.

Look, they’re panicking! Datil may look young, but he has the experience and skills of a man in his forties. That kind of hesitation will be the end of you!

“Agh... Gah!” the ant shrieked.

In an instant, Datil had driven his sword into the ant’s back. He pulled his weapon out and plunged it in once more, this time into its head. The ant fell to the ground, unmoving.

Datil’s scary...

“Phew, I thought we were goners. I mean, I was certain that would be the end of us,” Datil sighed.

“The magician ant took me by surprriise,” Fresa added.

Yeah, that magician surprised me, but there’s another part there that caught my attention.

“What do you mean?” Grida said.

Do you remember what was written on that stone signpost? It said, “The master and its spawn have fallen into slumber.” And this magician ant said it had to report this incident to the queen.

“Queen? So there must be a queen ant somewhere!”

Yeah, and it’s gotta be the boss of the whole colony. I’m not sure what “catastrophe” is supposed to mean in this world, but if this is supposed to be it, that’s almost funny.

Ding! “The bonus from the magician card will activate in 3...2...1... Activated.”

Oh, I wonder what bonus I’ll get!

“I’m excited too!”

Another announcement played. “A skill has been added. Would you like to hear a detailed explanation right now? Y/N.”

Fresa and Datil are checking their equipment, so now might be a good time. Yes.

Ding! “The skill you have obtained is ‘Turn Reversal.’ Any lasting damage from your magic can be nullified, with the exception of death.”

“Magic can be nullified?” Grida asked.

Ding! “Example one: you used a fire spell to burn down a house with four people inside.”

That’s a hell of an example.

“Immediately after casting, by declaring Turn Reversal, the destroyed house, its contents, and all of its surroundings will return to normal, and...”

Whoa! That’s a super useful ability!

“There will also be four unblemished corpses.”

That’s terrifying! Couldn’t you have phrased that bit a little nicer?

Ding! “Example two.”

Oh, there’s more?

“You use a spell that leads to a natural disaster, impacting a city with one hundred thousand people.”

The examples are getting worse! I won’t do that, okay?!

“Immediately after casting, by declaring Turn Reversal, the destroyed city and surrounding nature will return to normal, and...”

I don’t want to hear it! Nope! La la la!

“There will also be one hundred thousand unblemished corpses.”

I knew it!

Ding! “Example three.”

I got the idea! Stop making me a mass murderer!

“You use your water magic to heal a person that was near death. That person, in turn, heals a third person that was also near death.”

Why are there so many dying people?!

“By declaring Turn Reversal, the two people will immediately revert to their near-death state and will shortly die.”

Stop! Knock it off already!

“Furutsu, you’re an awful person...” Grida murmured.

Wait, Grida! These are just examples! I’ve never done anything like this, okay?!

She giggled. “I’m just kidding. You’re so cute!”

Just teasing, huh?

Ding! “To summarize: with Turn Reversal, all magical effects—and any subsequent chain reactions—except death can be reverted to their original state.”

“So the dead can’t be revived,” Grida said.

Seems like it. But if used carefully, this magic could be pretty useful.

“Ohhh? Apple-san, did something good happen to yooou?” Fresa said, cutting in.

How can she read my expressions so well?

“You don’t even have a face!” Grida said.

Yeah, she’s a weird one. Hm? Why’s she still looking at me?

“Hmmm, judging from the looks of it, it seems like something bad happened too,” she added.

How can she tell that much? She’s always so accurate.

“Do you think it’s about this thing, Fresa-san?” Datil was pointing at the magician ant’s corpse.

You’re half-right. If more of these big shot ants exist, they’re scurrying around to wake up the rest of the soldiers. The other half is that there’s most likely something even stronger than these guys.

“You mean the queen?” Grida said.

Yeah. At this rate, she might hear about us soon.

“Ack! What happens then?”

This is just a guess, but the queen might be able to wake up all the ants at once. That, or just throw a really strong ant at us.

“Th-That’s bad! We should do something quick!”

Agreed. There’s no time for us to mess around in all of these rooms. We should head straight to the deepest part of the colony and defeat the queen. I need to let those two know.

I went over to Fresa, who was trying to enter another little room.

Hmmm, how should I tell her, Grida? Any ideas?

“Aaaaack?!” Fresa cried out.

“What?! What’s wrong, Fresa?! I mean, Fresa-san?!”

Did an ant attack her from behind?! Grida, do you see anything?

“No, there’s nothing behind her,” Grida replied.

Huh? Then what’s she making all that racket about? A bunch of ants sitting in a room shouldn’t alarm her too much either.

“Th-Th-That-That’s...” Fresa stammered, pointing towards the other side of the room.

Hm? It’s ore, so what? Behind the ants were four ore deposits, piled high towards the ceiling. We’ve seen these before, haven’t we?

“D-D-D...” Fresa spluttered.

“Fresa-san, please calm down! What’s going on?!”

“Diamonds! That’s diamond ore!”

Seriously?! I’m surprised she saw that in this darkness!

There was a pause. “Please, don’t scare me like that,” Datil said, clearly irritated.

“Apple-san, don’t use the fire magic! You might burn theeem!”

Oh, I’ve heard of that before. Diamonds and charcoal have similar

compositions, so if exposed to enough heat, they'll vaporize. Apparently. Ugh, fine. I want to test out my new spell too, so I guess I'll just put them all to sleep. Darkness from below will desire the Heavens.

Ding! "Spell confirmed. Activating at five percent strength."

A dark cloud gathered around me.

Oooh, this makes me feel like an evil apple! Like the one that Snow White bites into or something!

"Heh heh, why do you seem so happy about that?" Grida said.

I've started to take pride in being an apple, you know? It's starting to get fun! Look! Here comes my wave of darkness! I feel evil! I'm so evil! Yessss!

"Apple-san?! Did it just use the spell that the ant used?" Datil said, his eyes going wide with surprise.

That's the reaction I'd expect.

"Heh heh, Apple-san can use any spell it experiences!" Fresa said proudly.

Not only do you seem surprisingly calm about this, but you also hit the bull's-eye, Fresa. Are you sure you're not listening in on us?

"Furutsu, I can't see very well, but the ants in the other rooms are falling asleep too!" Grida said.

Really? This has pretty good range then.

Ring! Ring! "Warning! [37] monsters have resisted this spell."

Good range, but not very effective, it seems.

"Seems like quite a few ants are still awake, Fresa-san," Datil noted.

Yeah, maybe they resist it since it was originally their magic. Now what?

"What's the matter? Even if you accidentally burn it with your magic, can't you just turn it back to normal?" Grida asked.

Oh, you're right. I've got Turn Reversal—guess I can test it out. Okay, Grida, go nuts! Could you use around three percent of your strength? Oh, but just in case, could you keep the damage to this room? If you hit the other room, the colony might collapse, and I wouldn't have the chance to use my skill.

"Okay! Here I go! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler, at three percent strength!"

Ding! "Spell confirmed. Firing spell at multiple targets at three percent strength."

A large number of fireballs burst out and flew towards the other side of the room.

"Huuuh?! Nooooo! Hey, Apple-san?!" Fresa cried.

Maybe three percent was overkill? The ants and the diamonds were both burned to a crisp. All right, now it's time to surprise her! Turn Reversal activate!

Fresa was on her knees, her mouth opening and closing.

Ding! “Turn Reversal has been activated. The effects of the last used spell, ‘Darkness from below will desire the Heavens’ will now reverse. 3...2...1... Completed. Cost: 2, Recast cooldown: 10 seconds.”

Wait, my last used spell is the sleeping magic? Why?!

“Ack! The ants in the other room woke up!” Grida said.

More than half of the ants in front of me remained burnt to ashes.

Only the ants I put to sleep beforehand had their corpses restored.

“Could it be that you can only reverse spells you cast?”

That makes sense! So the ants in front of me must be dead, because otherwise they would have woken up again?

“It shouldn’t matter whether they’re asleep or awake. That’s so weird,” Grida said. She seemed half-surprised and half-unhappy with the result.

Well, at least we learned that Turn Reversal only works on my spells. We can’t return Fresa’s diamonds, and we woke up the ants I put to sleep though. These Cards of Fate should seriously come with more detailed explanations.

“I’m sorry I destroyed the diamonds, Furutsu.”

No, it’s not your fault, Grida. You did it under my instruction, and we learned a few things. I sort of feel bad for Fresa though. She’s crying her heart out staring at the ashes.

“Let’s go, Fresa-san!”

“Nooooo! My diamonds! My diamooooooooonds!” Fresa cried as she threw me. She curled up in a ball and refused to move.

“What are you doing? Come on, let’s go,” Datil said.

She puffed her cheeks and turned her face away.

Are you a little kid?

“Okay, be that way. Then just stay here forever!” Datil replied, picking me up and walking towards another room.

Are you her mom?

“I feel sorry for Fresa-san,” Grida murmured.

No, we shouldn’t let her act so spoiled. She needs to know that some things won’t come back, no matter how much she cries and makes a fuss about it. Wait, we were just talking about Fresa specifically, right?

Beep Beep! “Warning! ‘Fresa’ on the safety settings list is out of range.”

What did the magician card just say?!

“Out of range?” Grida asked.

So the safety has a range? Seems fair. There’s no way everyone on the list could be invulnerable all the time.

I hopped out of Datil’s hand and rolled towards Fresa. “Hey, Apple-san!” he called.

Ding! “‘Fresa’ on the safety settings list is now in range.”

Hm, so the range is around twenty meters, give or take. I should remember this. At any rate, I did destroy the diamonds, so I suppose I should apologize.

“Apple-san?” Fresa said.

Roll. Roll. Roll. I rolled around Fresa a whole bunch of times.

Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll. Roll.

She just stared at me in silence.



She quietly stood up and picked me up, though she still didn't look very happy, and started walking.

I'm sorry, Fresa. Next time we find something valuable, I swear I won't torch it.

"Furutsu, we haven't seen any other diamonds," Grida remarked.
Forget diamonds, we've barely seen any other ores either.

We moved on quickly, prioritizing defeating the queen. We didn't even explore any of the other small rooms. As such, Fresa was still in a bad mood.

"Diamonds..." she muttered.

She's still talking about it.

"Come on, don't be so down, Fresa-san! Look over there!" Datil said, though with a totally unamused look on his face.

Fresa glanced at him and quickly looked down. "My diamonds... All those dia-mondos..." she muttered.

Wait. "Mondos?" As in Mondo Nakamura?

"Furutsu?" Grida asked.

Nothing. I'm just a fan of the TV series.

"You're odd," Grida said in a puzzled tone.

"Apple-san burned all my 'mondos...all my 'mondos..." Fresa kept mumbling.

Call them diamonds. I don't remember burning any people here.

"Diamonds..."

"Agh, fine—I mean, I understand! I'll purchase one for you when we return!" Datil yelled.

"Huuuh?!" she yelped.

"If we return home safely, I'll buy you a diamond. It won't be as impressive, however. Will that be all right?"

"I want..." Fresa mumbled softly.

"Hm? Come again?"

"I want a ring!"

"Fine, very well, I understand! Could you at least make it a small one?"

"Yaaaay! Hee hee! Okaaay! Apple-san, kill that big thing in a flash!"

Whoa, did she really cheer up that quickly?!

"Whooooa! Good going, Fresa-san!" Grida said happily.

What's with you guys? And by the way, I think it's gonna take a little more than usual to take that big old thing down.

"You're right. It looks really strong," Grida said.

Its presence is totally overwhelming. Why does it have such a powerful

aura?

Deeper within the room was a huge monster enveloped by a pale light. A few ants that looked like bodyguards were protecting it.

So that must be the queen.

Chapter 4: The Battle with the Queen

Five ants stood in front of the queen.

"They're well equipped," Datil noted. From right to left, each ant held a weapon: a spear, an axe, a sword, another spear, and another sword. Judging from the small size of those weapons, the ants must've stolen them from humans they'd killed.

"How dare you! How dare small, weak creatures like yourselves treat my beautiful children so horribly!" cried the queen.

"Furutsu, is it trying to communicate right now?" Grida asked.

They just sound like squeaking noises to you? Yeah, she's talking, and she seems really angry.

"Now go forth, my strongest soldiers. Avenge your fallen siblings!"
Strongest soldiers? That doesn't sound good.

"Night of the storm. Forever-closed box. The beast that lives deep in the forest," the queen chanted, brandishing her staff. "Eyes will rot, ears shall be severed, noses from under the earth."

Again, these chants sound really weird. Monster magic sounds so much more sinister.

"Masterless castle, the rotten gates will close." The red jewel on the queen's staff started to slowly turn purple. "Dark magic, demon." A black fog emanated from the queen and poured into the five soldier ants. "Now, my children, you are invincible. Show them your true power!"

The ants squeaked loudly in reply.

Did she buff them? That's not good.

"Furutsu, should I fire my magic?" Grida asked.

Good idea. These soldiers don't seem too smart, so magic might work on them. All right, light 'em up!

"Okay! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler, at three percent!" Grida said.

Ding! "Spell confirmed. Firing spell at multiple targets at three percent strength." Five powerful balls of fire zoomed towards the ants.

Nice shot! Wait, huh?!

Ring! Ring! "Warning! [5] monsters have resisted this spell."

"The apple magic isn't working?!" Datil said.

"But it was at three percent strength! Why didn't it woork?"

Fresa cried.

My magic and Grida's look completely different. How did you get the

percentage right, Fresa?

"My magic isn't working," Grida said glumly.

"Oh ho? That wasn't half bad," said the queen.

Did you hear that, Grida? The queen said your magic "wasn't half bad."

"Huh, really? Heh heh, hooray!" she cheered.

I'm not really sure if being happy is the right response here.

"Heh heh heh. However, my magic makes us invulnerable to all kinds of spells! Your sorcery shall not affect us!" the queen gloated.

I see, so they're invulnerable to magic because of her spell. That sounds so good! I want to learn it, but I doubt she'll use it on me.

"I'm not sure why the apple magic isn't working, but guess I should use my sword!" Datil said. He stepped forward, drawing his blade. "Five might be a bit too many for me though."

Datil's strong. He might be able to go toe-to-toe against five normal ants, but these ants are clearly not normal. So...

"Huh? Apple-san?" Fresa said.

I left her hands and rolled alongside Datil.

It might look like I just rolled by his feet though.

"Will you fight with me?" Datil said, looking down at me.

Of course. Physical attacks are my specialty anyways, not magic.

"Furutsu, be careful!" Grida warned.

Of course! Leave it to me!

"Apple-san, we'll start outwards and work our way in. I'll begin with the right side!" Datil said.

Then I'll take the left. Grida, when things start looking dangerous, please cast your water magic on Datil.

"Okay, I've got it!" Grida said.

All right. Here we go. Roll! Roll! Roll!

"Raaaaagh!" Datil yelled, lunging forward at an amazing speed.

Oh? I didn't think you could catch up to my rolling!

The ants squeaked loudly. All five of them headed towards Datil.

No one's on me.

"Uh, it's because you're so small!" Grida answered hastily.

Thanks for making me feel a little better. Between a guy who's roaring and an apple who's rolling, I definitely look the weaker of the two.

"Th-That's not true! You're just small! You're a lot smaller than a normal person!"

Huh, that's weird. I feel like someone's smacking my ego around like a punching bag.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

I'm fine, I'm fine. I think. Now's not the time to be mentally weak.

The first ant had parried Datil's strike, and another was preparing to attack him.

“Be careful, Datil! Behind youuu!” Fresa cried.

“The ants aren’t coming for you, Furutsu!” Grida said.

That’s fine by me. They notice me, but they’re more scared of him. It’s an opportunity for me to strike! I’ll aim for the far left ant’s head. Take this!

Bam!

I hit it! The ant’s head...is still attached?! Did it guard?!

The ant had instantaneously protected its head. Its left leg was blown off and on the floor.

It’s still got two other left legs though.

“Furutsu! Watch out!”

Damn! Is there another one?! An attack from the side with a sword! It’ll slice me in half!

I focused where I thought it was aiming, and increased the area with as many cells as possible to protect myself.

Slash!

Owww! *Damn, they’re strong!* That whole chunk of me was scooped out.

“Furutsu, I can heal you!”

No, I’ll be fine. I have the blessing card on my side.

The scooped-out part started bubbling, and in an instant, the damaged section regenerated.

See? Back to normal in no time.

“Hasty child. Dry well. Long legs. Exhausted shells. Exhausted flesh. Live long. Eternity. Prison of the soul.”

Was that the queen’s voice?! She’s chanting another spell!

“Dark magic, healing.”

The ant with a lost limb was surrounded by a dark fog, and reappeared completely healed, as though it took no damage at all.

A healing spell?! And it even got its leg back!

“That’s more powerful than the water spell!” Grida said.

Yeah, though I’d rather not get healed by something so nasty-sounding. At any rate, now’s not the time to be impressed.

“Datil! Let’s retreat for now!” Fresa called.

“Damn! These ants wield their weapons better than humans do!” Datil said.

I guess they aren’t called the strongest for nothing. Even if we do manage to get a shot in, they get healed immediately! What’s more... I lunged forward. Aaaaagh! Hit!

Bam!

See, even if I aim for their heads, they guard it well. If I’m not careful, they’ll follow that up with a counterattack.

“Furutsu, don’t push yourself,” Grida said.

Right. Sorry, Grida.

“Oh ho ho ho! How foolish! Now, slice them into pieces!” the queen ordered.

We have no way out if this keeps up. The queen's healing magic negates our attacks, and Grida's magic has no effect! Should I increase the power? If our magic could affect them, then maybe...!

“Wait, Furutsu, something's off,” Grida said.

Hm?

“The queen ant's magic makes it so that my magic doesn't work.”

Right.

“It also heals any wounds from your attacks.”

Right. Wait, huh? You're right, that's a little weird. If magic doesn't work on them, how is the queen healing them?

“It's weird. We're both using magic.”

I got it! I know now! The queen said they were invulnerable to magic attacks. Good job, Grida! Clever girl!

“Heh heh heh! I don't really get what you mean, but those comments make me happy!”

All right then. Let's test this out. We don't have much time.

“Test?”

Yup. I'll go first, so watch closely.

“Okaaaay!”

If we're hitting them at full strength, Grida, we can't afford to mess this up or get our spells reflected or anything. We should experiment carefully. First, I'll test out my max strength. If this works, we wouldn't need to cross any dangerous bridges. Remove the shackles of fire, traveler. Strength at one hundred percent!

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Activating at one hundred percent strength.”

This is just a test, so I'll only fire one. My target is the ant closest to Datil.

“J-Just what is that magic?!” the queen shrieked.

Whew, that flame is huge. It's the strongest magic I can cast currently. It's overwhelmingly hot, but this is still only ten percent of Grida's max power.

“Whoa! Apple-san's casting something incredible!” Datil said, sounding slightly giddy.

I feel you. Seeing this spell at my full strength gets me a bit excited too.

The large flame headed straight for the ant and made contact.

How's this?

Ring! Ring! “Warning! Target has resisted this spell.”

I see, so even at full strength it's not good enough.

“Oh ho ho ho! Not a scratch! That spell won't affect us at all!” the queen said triumphantly.

All right. Fire magic experiment's over.

“That wasn’t good enough?! Furutsu, I should attack next!” Grida said.

Wait, that’s dangerous right now. If we go above my max strength, above your ten percent power, we might be able to defeat them. But...

Datil looked shocked. “Damn! Even that didn’t have any effect?”

The ceiling started crumbling. I probably damaged it with that full-power blast.

If the aftershock of Grida’s magic destroys this colony, we’d get buried alive. Our only hope, Turn Reversal, wouldn’t have any effect on her spells.

“What should we do?” Grida asked.

We’ll be fine. I just wanted to confirm something. All right, then let’s test this out! Strength at fifty percent, break the water’s seal, thieves!

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Activating at fifty percent strength.”

We felt something was off before because they were able to just shrug off any and all spells, but they could still get healed.

“Wait, Furutsu, that spell is...?!” Grida cried.

The glowing blue healing magic hit the sword-wielding ant closest to Datil.

All right! It’s a hit!

“A-Apple-san?! Why did you just heal the enemy?” Fresa yelled.

Ah, Fresa, don’t worry. That’s not the point of the spell.

“Wait, look at that! Why was this magic not repelled?!” Datil said.

Oh, you noticed?

“Why? Why did it work? What’s going on?” Grida asked.

*The queen cast a spell that negates all magic **attacks**. It probably doesn’t affect buffs or healing magic, which is why she was able to heal all five ants.*

“I get it! If it negates all magic, the queen wouldn’t be able to heal them!”

Exactly. My spell at one hundred percent strength was resisted, but my healing magic hit them no problem.

“Huh? But isn’t that bad? All you did was heal them.”

Heh heh heh. Just sit back and watch. If my assumption is correct...

“Wh-What’s going on? This ant is...” Datil said. The ant in front of him had completely changed its behavior. It was hobbling all over the place, and started swinging its sword around wildly.

All right, the plan should be obvious now. They’re wide open!

“Im-Impossible! What magic have you wrought on my child?!” the queen cried.

“Huh? Why’s that ant all wobbly?” Grida asked.

Grida, have you ever heard of moderation? There’s always just the right amount for anything. If you drink too much medicine, you might get sick. That ant got way overhealed, so now it’s wobbly.

“Raaaagh!” Datil yelled, his sword gleaming as he struck. With a

shriek, the wobbly ant's head fell to the floor.

I knew you'd get it!

"H-How is this possible? A human, overhealing my children to inebriate them? Absurd!" the queen screamed.

Well, I'm not a human anymore, but since you're so surprised, we'll hit you with one more. All right, Grida! Please cast the healing spell on the remaining four ants with thirty percent of your power!

"Okaaaay! Break the water's seal, thieves, at thirty percent strength!" she said.

Her thirty percent is my three hundred. This is pretty powerful, you know?

Ding! "Spell confirmed. Firing spell at multiple targets at thirty percent strength."

The light of Grida's healing spell was a deeper blue, and it quickly enveloped the other four ants. In an instant, they started writhing on the ground and running around in circles.

It's working!

"Wow! My magic hit them!" Grida said happily.

Good for you!

"Y-You wretch!" the queen ant said. "Grrr..."

You can't save them anymore, can you? If you try to heal them again, they're only going to get worse!

"I get it now! You're amazing, Apple-san!" Datil grinned at me.

Seems like he got what I was going for.

"Hey? What's going on? What's happeniiiiing?!" Fresa wailed in surprise.

Just sit back and watch for now.

"Gggh! Gack! Graar!" the ants squeaked. Datil took their discarded weapons and carefully killed each ant.

He may look young, but he's calm, collected, and quick to adapt. You can tell he's an experienced adventurer. All right, then. I'll aim for that one with a spear—that dance it's doing sure looks weird. Take this!

Bam!

The impact echoed through the room as I tackled the ant. Its head flew off and it sank to the ground, still convulsing and twitching.

Phew! Finally hitting it feels so good!

"You! You insolent foool! I'll never forgive you! Never!" The queen was quivering with anger. Even the air around her seemed to tremble.

"Furutsu, she looks pretty mad, huh?" Grida said.

Grida didn't understand their language, but even she seemed to notice the shift in the air.

Well, if she's got this much of an aura, I'm sure anyone would notice.

Datil sighed in relief. "All five of them are... What's going on?!"

What was that surge?!"

"Eek?! What is that?!" Fresa screamed.

The pale light surrounding the queen turned pitch black.

I guess she's the final boss.

A deep thudding noise filled the room as she stamped her legs with anger. "Huff. How very, very unpleasant. Oh, I feel most unpleasant." She spoke slowly, as though she was trying to calm herself down.

The ones that calmly try to kill you are worse than the ones that just go berserk with anger.

"F-Furutsu, I'm scared."

Don't worry, Grida. I'm by your side.

I tried to reassure Grida, but the queen was clearly very strong. Her murderous intent was so powerful, it felt as though she was pressing a blade against my throat. My body, sensing that her strength was clearly on a completely different level, was setting off alarm bells left and right.

"Apple-san, I was a bit naive. Do you think we can really win against that?" Datil whispered to me.

I know. I was taking this a bit too lightly myself. But we must win. If we don't, the people above ground are doomed.

"Furutsu..."

Grida, don't worry about me, so please cast a healing spell on Datil and Fresa.

"Okay, I'll do my best!"

All right, then I'll go first! Strength at one hundred percent! Remove the shackles of fire, traveler!

Ding! "Spell confirmed. Activating at one hundred percent strength."

A huge flame flew towards the queen.

All right! I hit her! I hit her, right?

"How lukewarm. I hope you realize that I'm the queen. Perhaps you felt a rush of confidence because you killed my children? Curse your utter folly as I send you to your deaths," she said.

She didn't even resist it. Did she take it head-on? A direct hit, and she's completely uninjured?!

"Furutsu! Above you!" Grida cried.

Above?!

The queen's monstrous body had vanished, before suddenly appearing above us.

"It's fast!" Datil said, dodging to the right. I immediately dodged to the left.

Boom!

As soon as she landed, her left leg—clutching her staff—was

pointed towards Datil, while her body faced me.

“How curious. It seems that fruit’s got a mind of its own.”

Damn, she’s got her attention on me. I think I stood out a bit too much.

“Ugh! I can’t seem to find an opening!” Datil said. He was unable to move, and I was frozen in place too. One wrong move, and I would be blown into pieces.

“To think I’d have to destroy this puny fruit to avenge my children...” the queen said.

A chill ran through my entire body, and I used all of my strength to leap back as far as I could.

WHOOSH!

The sound cut through the air, and was immediately followed by the queen’s staff ripping through my skin.

“Eeeek?!” Grida’s small voice echoed through my head.

Th-That was close! A moment later, and I would’ve been sliced to bits!

“So you’ve dodged that, have you?” The queen faded out of sight, and her voice came from a completely different direction. “I’m more interested than angry now. Just how are you able to move, little one?”

Before I knew it, she was already waiting where I was dodging.
Damn it! She’s so fast! I couldn’t see her at all!

“Oh ho ho ho ho! See, I’ve caught you now,” she said as she picked me up. She stared down at me and gripped me tight. “Judging from your previous magic, you certainly don’t seem like a normal fruit. Perhaps you’re a demon in disguise?”

Nope! I’m not a demon! I’m just a cute little apple!

“Hmmm, splitting you open may reveal your little secrets.”

Ack! Stop! Owwww! Hey, stop that! Owwww! I-I’m gonna break!
Owww!

“Raaaaagh! Let go of Apple-san!” Datil yelled, slashing the queen from behind.

“Quiet down, now. Wait your turn,” the queen said.

She parried Datil and his sword flew into the air. In the next instant, he was flung to the side. He hit the ground hard, rolling away before coming to a stop.

“Oh ho. I’d assumed you would show a little more backbone than that, hm? I suppose not.”

“Datil? No! D-Datil! Datil?!” Fresa’s screams echoed through the room.

“Oh no! Break the water’s seal, thieves!” Grida yelled.

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Activating spell at two percent strength.”
Datil’s body was wrapped in a blue light.

Nice job, Grida!

“Heh, you really are rather interesting. I’m intrigued,” the queen

chuckled.

“Ugh... Grr...” Datil slowly got up and reached for his sword. His injuries were healed, but it seemed he still wasn’t fully conscious.

This isn’t good. We’re gonna lose at this rate.

“Furutsu! Should I cast my magic?” Grida said.

Y-Yeah! Use your water spell at one hundred percent strength!

“Roger! Break the water’s seal, thieves, at one hundred percent strength!”

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Activating spell at one hundred percent strength.” A light so deeply blue it was almost black enveloped the queen.

Please work!!!

“Nnnngaaaaah!” the queen shrieked. She released me from her grip with a look of ecstasy, and I rolled on the ground. She had left a dent in my body, but I was mostly uninjured. My blessing card had started to regenerate me.

“How?! How do you have such a powerful healing spell?!” She shrieked as her body writhed.

Oh?! Was this super effective?!

“Thank you for this wonderful magic! It’d be rude of me to not return the favor with the most magnificent death for you!”

“Furutsu! It’s not working! Watch out!” Grida screamed.

The queen found me on the ground. She took her staff and swung it like a golf club. I immediately strengthened my outer skin to block, but I wasn’t even sure if I made it in time.

“Apple-san?!” Datil yelled.

“Nooooooo! Apple-san?! Apple-saaaaan!” Fresa screamed.

The spot where she struck me was instantly crushed. Fruit juice leaked from my wounds, and only a thin piece of red skin was keeping my two halves together.

Wow, and I can still see just fine. Apples are amazing.

“F-Furutsu! Stay with me!” Grida yelled.

Grida, I’ll be fine. I’ve got the blessing card by my side. I’ll be back to normal in no time.

“Waaaaaah! Nooooo! Did you die?!”

Huh? Can you not hear me? Am I not alive anymore?

“Furutsu! Furutsuuuuu! Waaaaah!”

Am I dead? Did I just die? Oh, okay. I’m sorry for making you cry, Grida. I couldn’t keep my promise to let you out of that card.

My vision is getting darker...

I can’t...

See...

Anything...

Everything around me went dark. Dark, cold, and sad.

Wh-What happened to me?

“Furutsu!” I heard a warm and kind voice echoing pleasantly in my head, leading me out of this dark world.

“Is that you...Grida?” I asked.

The voice laughed. “Furutsu!”

Wait, that voice just now sounded weird. Almost like...

“Wait, is this my voice?” I said. *I can hear it. I can hear my own voice. But that’s impossible.* “What’s going on?”

“Furutsu, how are you? Are you doing okay?”

I knew it—this is Grida’s voice. But it usually echoes inside of me.

“Grida?” My mouth moved. I felt a rush of nostalgia, as I breathed air into my lungs and pushed it back out, bringing an actual voice to life.

She laughed again. “Furutsu!”

I’m not catching Grida’s voice with my outer layer. I’m hearing it with my actual ears. Both my voice and hers are echoing through my ears?!

“But how? I don’t even have a mouth!” *I turned into an apple. There’s no way this can happen!*

“No, you have ears and a mouth. See, I do too!”

Suddenly, someone appeared from the shadows.

“What?!” I yelled.

A cute blonde girl in white was standing in front of me. She looked like she came straight out of a mythology book. Probably an elementary schooler, or a middle schooler at most. She stared at me with her beautiful green eyes, and took my hands in hers as she smiled.

Wait, my hands? My hands! These are my hands!

“Furutsu!”

There’s no mistaking this voice! This girl has to be...

“Grida?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she replied.

What’s going on?! I don’t get it!

“Grida, what’s going on here?! I can see you—and look, my hands! My mouth! I can talk and hear?!”

Grida cocked her head to the side as she kept holding my hands. “Um, which Furutsu are you right now? Hmmm...so you’re surprised by me and by your hands, huh?”

What’s she talking about? Which Furutsu? Right now? I don’t get her at all.

“It seems like it’s your first time seeing me. So that means...you don’t have *that* yet,” she mumbled. She kept gazing into my eyes, and

I felt like they would suck me in.

“Could you explain, Grida? Where am I? What are you mumbling about?”

“Even if I tell you, it won’t mean anything right now. You’re just going to forget it soon.”

Huh? “Wait, what? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, I got it! This is the time we were fighting the queen ant! Okay, then we’ll be fine.” She seemed to understand something as she nodded her head.

Wait, Grida-san? I really would like an explanation here...

“Heh heh, listen closely, okay? You and I are still fine. We’ll definitely be okay. So don’t give up!”

“F-Fine? I don’t think I’m fine at all! Explanation, por favor!”

Grida looked a bit troubled at my reply. “Even if I explain, you’ll forget right away.”

She gently released my hands and turned around, and her golden hair and white sleeves swayed in the wind. “I’ll definitely come back to meet you again.” She gave me a bit of a sad smile and melted into the shadows.

“Grida? Hey, Grida! Wait!”

“Goodbye, Furutsu. Good luck. Look, Datil-san and Fresa-san are...” her voice slowly faded and disappeared.

It was dark, cold, and sad. My surroundings lost the speck of color that she gave off, and became pitch black once more.

It was dark, cold, and sad.

What happened to me...?

“Apple-san?!”

Datil?

“Nooooooo! Apple-san?! Apple-saaaaan!”

Fresa? My consciousness was hazy. What was I doing?

“F-Furutsu! Stay with me!”

That queen ant got me good... I remember now. I was talking with Grida.

“Waaaaaah! Nooooo! Did you die?!”

Huh? Did you always talk like that, Grida? Just now, you were more... Wait, huh? More what? I can’t think clearly. Did I die? No, I’m alive. I’m fine, I’m still alive.

“Furutsu! Furutsuuuuu! Waaaaah!”

Don’t cry, Grida! Can’t you hear me? Damn it! The queen’s getting closer! She’s planning on finishing me off.

“Raaaah! Get away from this apple! Stooooop!” Datil roared.

Don’t push yourself, Datil. Just get out of here with Fresa. Please...

“I won’t let you hurt Apple-san anymore!” Fresa yelled. She stood in front of me, trying to shield me from the queen.

Not you too! Stop! Please, stop! What can I do? Is there nothing I can do?!

“Hey, quick question?” said another voice.

Huh?

“Why don’t you bond with those two?”

Wh-Who’s there? What are you talking about?

“Hmmm? Hmmmmmm? Did you really not hear anything?”

Let me repeat: what are you talking about?! You’re not making any sense.

“I mean, you did form a pretty difficult bond with something inside the box. So I assumed your soul was on the ruler’s side, Furutsu-san.”

Box? Bond? What are you talking about?

“Ahem. Ah, sorry about that. If you aren’t, I should speak a bit more professionally, shouldn’t I?”

I really don’t care. Just answer my question. What are you on about?!

“Ah, so you don’t even know who I am. Well, I suppose that makes sense. Do excuse my late introduction—I am the curse card.”

The curse card? So you’re the card that turned me into an apple!

“See? You’re misunderstanding something here! Really, I haven’t done anything to earn your ire. Not one bit.”

What do you mean? Of course I’d hate the card that reincarnated me into the thing that killed me!

“Non, non, non. My ability is to bond two souls together. It’s insulting to the highest degree for you to think of me as a curse.”

Huh?! Look at me! I’m an apple! An apple!

“Yes, I see that. The reason you’re so strongly bound to the last item that killed you is simply because the gods have *no idea* how to use my power properly. But of course, it’s not as though I could inform them myself either.”

I have no idea where this is going, and I have no time for it! I have to save Fresa and Datil!

The voice chuckled. “It’ll be fine.”

No way in hell is it fine! If I don’t hurry, those two will be ant food. W-Wait, what was that?

“A special service. Do keep this our little secret, okay? I just wanted to talk with you for a bit, Furutsu-sama. I took the liberty to slooow down time. Seriously, a secret, all right?”

Everything around me seemed to stand still. Datil, Fresa, and even the ant were frozen in place.

“Now we’ve got some time. Oh, just a moment, if you would.”

I heard a rustling sound as though someone was going through a

toy box. *Are you looking for something?*

“Ah, found it! This is it. What’s with all this dust? I’ll blow it all away. Ack! Whoa! Achoo!”

What’s that?

“Uh, let’s see. Was it this button? I’ll just press it. Beep!” **Ding Ding!** “Ah, testing, testing... This is an announcement from the curse card. Okay, good.”

Wait, that dinging sound was a lot like the one from the Cards of Fate. You had to set that manually?!

“Thank you for your patience. There’s a rule to always make that ding whenever a card makes an announcement. All right then, where were we?”

You told me that the curse card wasn’t created to reincarnate me into the item I was killed by.

“Right, right! The gods reincarnate users of the curse card via ‘Auto-connect’ mode.”

Auto-connect mode? Like it automatically bonds me with something?

“The reincarnated usually have no destined bonds. They’re like blank sheets of paper. If you were to simply auto-connect in such a precarious state, of course you’d bond with whatever you feel most strongly towards—such as that which led to your demise. Don’t you think so?”

Don’t ask me.

“The same goes for the other cards. Their true powers are never drawn out, or else are simply used incorrectly. It’s casting pearls before swine! What a waste!”

Wait, I’m not following. Why can’t the gods use you properly? Didn’t they make the Cards of Fate?

“Ohhh, we’re starting from there? All right, okay, okay. Uh, let’s see.”

You’re hiding something from me, aren’t you.

“Well, to put it bluntly: no, the gods did not make the Cards of Fate. And as you’ve said, our creator hasn’t explained anything to them.”

What the heck? Why would the gods give something so mysterious and hard to use to the reincarnated?

“I agree! I absolutely agree! I understand your anger. But this is something the gods were forced to do, so please do forgive them.”

Forced?

“Whoops! I’m terribly sorry, but I’m not authorized to inform you of any more than this. It’s very tough to be in such a low position, isn’t it, Furutsu-sama?”

Arg! Knock it off with the relatability! I won’t force you. I’m grateful that you already told me so much.

“Heh heh heh, I thank you for your kind words. Hmm... I don’t think it’ll be a problem if I tell you this. I understand that you can hear my voice, but the gods, much less normal reincarnators, cannot.”

Huh?

“Even the gods aren’t aware of the little things: like how we Cards of Fate make these announcements, or of some of our extra abilities, special settings, or certain bonuses.”

Seriously?

“Is it hard for you to believe? I agree! We did try our best to reach out and explain ourselves, you know. That is our rule, after all. But they can’t hear us! They keep ignoring us! See, look. Beep.” **Ding Ding!** “See, what’s the point in ringing if they can’t hear us?”

C-Calm down! I understand your feelings! Why do you keep pressing that button?

“Ahem. Excuse me. Just a little frustration slipping out.”

This is surprising. So the gods and reincarnators don’t know how to properly use these convenient and amazing Cards of Fate?

“I thank you for your high words of praise. That’s exactly it.”

Wait, so this applies to the curse card too!

“Exactly. When you picked me, Furutsu-sama, I went ‘**ding!**’ and announced that you can change operation modes via the settings screen.”

You don’t have to press that button every time! Also, hang on, didn’t you have to dig that out? You said it was covered in dust. Did you really make that announcement?

“Oho! Very astute, sir! As you said, I couldn’t find the button that day, so I mimicked the sound with my voice. **Ding Ding!** You see?”

Wait, that was your voice?! You’re really good at it! Why not just keep saying it instead of pressing that button?! Wait, that’s not the point. I didn’t hear any sort of announcement back there. Are you sure you were talking?

“Of course I was. However, as I explained earlier, not many people can hear the voices of the Cards of Fate.”

I see. Maybe I wasn’t able to hear your voices because I hadn’t actually reincarnated yet?

“Correct. And if you had been able to hear my announcements before your reincarnation, you may have been able to switch off the auto-connect mode, allowing you to reincarnate as a human.”

Hey, that’s a total catch-22. I could have reincarnated as a human, but I had to be reincarnated as an apple in order to hear the announcement? Am I hearing you right?

“Indeed. The curse card was not originally meant to bond the soul with their cause of death.”

Then what was it originally supposed to do?

“An excellent question. Simply put, the card was meant to bond

souls together.”

Bond the souls together? What happens then?

“A variety of things. Once the souls are bonded, anything can happen!”

Hmmm, that doesn't really tell me anything. Got any specific examples?

“Let's see. As you know, when you and Grida-sama were bonded, Furutsu-sama...”

Huh? What?!

“You were able to share the magician card, regenerate mana automatically, share the storage card to allow her to take items out and manage items you didn't touch, among other useful effects.”

Wait, wait, wait! Wait!

“Yes, what is it?”

Don't act so matter-of-fact about it! Grida and I are bonded? When? Where?!

“Were you not aware of this?”

No?! No one told me anything!

“Well, the curse card is ‘on silent’ by default, so to speak. Should I do some periodic announcements from now on?”

Y-Yeah, please do. Why are you silent by default, anyways?

“But it's rather odd that you haven't noticed. I may be on silent, but there should still be a loud noise when souls bond.”

Really? I haven't heard anything like that... Wait a second. Was it that big metallic clack sound?

“Ah, yes, that's the one! The bonds are set with heavy locks, and there's no silent mode for that.”

The real question is why you keep trying to keep these things secret! This is important stuff!

“Also, if you were able to unconsciously form a bond with Grida-sama, I would think there's no need for explanations or practice. If both of you wish to be together for as long as either of you are alive, the card will activate automatically and a permanent lock shall connect you.”

Back then, I think I only gave Grida her name and said “nice to meet you.”

The voice chuckled. “That's not all. According to my records, you also promised that you would find a way to safely take her out of the storage card.”

You're right. That's my reason for living.

“Right. But!” it said emphatically. “Logically speaking! There's no way you could find a way to remove her! Meaning, you swore to each other that you'd search for a method together for eternity. Viewing things in a positive light, this is the conclusion that I came to!”

Hmmm, I can't tell if you're an optimist or a pessimist here, but let's put that aside for now. This means that our bond via the curse card, all by itself, gave us new abilities?

"Yes! You're only in the first stage of your bond, and yet you've found so many abilities! I look forward to watching you deepen your relationship!"

So we can't just bond and let things be.

"Furutsu-sama, this is why I'm called the curse card. Please remember this, okay? The more you bond with a soul, the more advantageous effects the two of you will receive. Conversely, if your bonds are shallow, the effects will be more negative."

I see, that makes sense. That does sound like a curse to me.

"Whoops, we've talked a bit too much. Time will shortly return to normal. Furutsu-sama, I urge you to form a soul bond with the other two members of your party. I'm sure you'll receive an ability that will save you from this situation."

How do I do that?

"It's simple. You must decide that you'll be with them for as long as either of you are alive. The other two must wish the same. Now, bond with them! Oh, and this time around, I restored your body to normal. This is a onetime thing, okay? Keep it a secret!"

My surroundings started to slowly speed up.

Grida, sorry to make you worry. I'm fine now.

"Oh, I'm happy! I'm really so happy!" she cried.

Fresa stood in front of me, her legs shoulder-width apart. In front of her was Datil with a sword in his hand. Both were protecting me from the queen ant, who was inching closer to us.

Grida, I'm gonna live by your side. I'm not gonna whine or give up anymore.

"Yeah! Okay! It's a promise! Promise me, okay?"

Yeah, I promise. I paused. Grida, do you like Fresa and Datil? Do you want to be with them too?

"Yes. Yes, of course! I really like both of them!"

*Then this won't be a problem. Let's do this. **I wish to be with Fresa and Datil for as long as I live.***

Ding! "You have sent a request to soul bond. Please wait. You are waiting for [002] bonds."

Clack. Clack.

The moment the metallic sounds played, Fresa and Datil started glancing around.

You guys heard that too, right?

"Furutsu, I just heard something."

That's the sound of locks on my soul. I'll have to wait for their replies now.

I rolled towards Fresa's feet.

"Ah, I'm so glad! You're better, Apple-san!" Fresa cried. She picked me up and hugged me.

Datil slowly made his way towards us, his sword still raised. "You seem fine, Apple-san. You're tough! But we're in a tricky situation here."

I agree. That's why I need both of your help. I know you can't hear me, but please understand me!

I shouted as loudly as I could telepathically.

Fresa! Datil! I want to stay with you guys! Please, lend me your strength!!!!!!!!!!!!

"Datil?"

"Fresa-san?"

They both looked at each other quizzically, then down at me with big smiles.

"Of course, Apple-san! Let's be together alwaaays!" Fresa said.

Clack.

"Well, that was my intention from the start. We'll live and die together!" Datil said. **Clack.**

Ding! "[002] bonds have been approved. Soul bonds have been completed. Abilities will appear in 5...4...3..."

*They understood me! They **understood** me!*

"Let's work hard together, okaaaay?"

"All right, now that that's decided, let's kill this puny ant and go home!"

Fresa! Datil!

"Furutsu! Your power!" Grida said.

Yeah, thanks to the soul bonds, they're giving me power, and I'm sharing my own with them!

Ding Ding! "Due to the curse card, every member's base abilities have increased. New abilities have been discovered."

I'm overflowing with power!

Ding Ding! "'Furutsu' has learned 'Shackle' and 'Resistant Outer Layer.'"

Ding Ding! "'Grida' has learned 'Barrier Isolation' and 'Coin Creation.'"

Ding Ding! "'Datil' has learned 'Cell Manipulation' and 'Pseudo-blessing.'"

Ding Ding! "'Fresa' has learned 'King of Apples' and 'Hoard Lottery.'"

We all simultaneously learned abilities that seemed to strengthen us. *I'm not sure what some of these are supposed to do, though.*

"Furutsu, this is amazing!" Grida said.

Yeah, we might be able to finally beat the queen.

“Fresa-san, is this...?” Datil asked.

“Yeees! It must be! This is it!” she cried.

Everything seems crystal clear now. I’m not sure how to put it, but I feel incredibly relaxed.

Datil and Fresa’s attitudes had done a complete one-eighty, and they were smiling now.

“Fresa-san, I heard—no, I sensed it.”

“Yeah. This is odd, but Apple-san must’ve given us some powers!”

Hey, I got a few abilities too, so we’re even, okay? Not like you can hear me, though.

“Huh? Can they not?” Grida asked.

Of course. I don’t even have a mouth.

“Hmmm? But they definitely responded to you earlier, didn’t they?”

You’re right. My heartfelt cry, which they shouldn’t have been able to hear, still reached them.

“Hey, Datil. I heard Apple-san’s voice earlier!” Fresa said.

“Yeah, I definitely did too! We must’ve gotten these powers because we responded to it!”

In other words, it was a miracle.

“What is this? I don’t feel pressured or scared at all.” Datil was grinning from ear to ear.

“Yeah, and we’re so close to the ant too,” Fresa added, smiling along.

The queen’s literally right in front of us.

“Have you decided to surrender, you puny weaklings?” she hissed. She was so close that one swing of her staff could easily hit us, and she promptly did so towards Datil’s face.

“Hey, I can see that, you know? Cell Manipulation!” For an instant, Datil seemed to waver, and the queen’s staff was hurled into the air. I heard another announcement.



Ding! “Cell Manipulation has been activated. Remaining time: 59...58...57...”

Datil and Fresa can't hear this announcement, and yet...

“What on earth? I understand what this ability is and how to use it. Cell Manipulation not only strengthens my muscles throughout my entire body, but my cells themselves. I can move just like Apple-san!” Datil's voice was filled with wonder. He was right on the money about his new ability.

“What? You just got faster, didn't you?!” the queen said.

Seems like Fresa's in the same boat.

“I understand how this works too. Activate King of Apples.”

Ding! “King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1...”

Fresa held me in her left hand and glared straight at the queen with a dignified look on her face. Her outstretched right hand had another apple floating in front of it. “This new ability of mine is King of Apples. It's the ability to manipulate apples however I wish. Heh heh, this really is like apple magiic!” A bunch of other apples suddenly appeared around her, floating in the air. “Seems like five is my limit for now. Harden, superoxidize, leech.”

Ding! “All apples will be hardened, superoxidized, and leech seeded. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete.”

Fresa completely understands her own abilities too.

“You vermin! Stop scurrying around! Just what is happening here?” the queen screamed.

“Amazing. I don't even feel like myself,” Datil said, as he proceeded to overpower the queen.

“Datil! Doooodge!” Fresa yelled, and Datil jumped out of the way. “Here I gooo! Apple Meteor!” The apples floating around Fresa flew towards the queen at breakneck speed.

“What? Are those fruits?!” the queen shouted. She raised both of the staves she wielded in a cross pattern, trying to block the attack. The apples dodged around her guard and struck her in the abdomen. “Gaaaah?! Why do these tiny fruits hurt so badly? Eek! It burns! It hurts! What's going on?!”

We heard a sizzling sound as smoke rose from her figure, and a sweet aroma of burnt apples lingered in the air.

“It seems like my oxidation is a bit weak,” Fresa noted.

The queen's hard exterior melted away as the acid seeped in. So *that's what she meant by “superoxidization.”*

“Raaagh! D-Don't think you can win against me, you insolent fools!” the queen roared.

“And don’t think my attack’s over yeeet!” Fresa replied.

Fresa, can you understand the queen’s words too?!

“Wh-What?! Something’s burrowing into my body! Ow! What is this?!”

“The seeds of those apples have made their way deep in your body. They’ll take root and suck out all your bodily fluids!”

What? That’s terrifying. That’s a different plant entirely. Just what do you think apples are, anyways?

“You! Youuuu insolent foool! These toys will not kill me! This...owwww!”

“You shouldn’t try to pull it out, you knooow? Their roots are tangled with your nerves and blood vessels.”

That’s so scary! That’s straight-up a biological weapon! Hey! You can eat seeds from normal apples! Just don’t eat too many at once, but they’re generally harmless! Also, apple cider vinegar’s good for you!

“That’s amazing, Fresa! Er, I mean, Fresa-san! Uh, now it’s my turn!” Datil said.

Ding! “Cell Manipulation’s effects have expired. Recast possible in: 59...58...57...”

“Aw, man...” Datil said, his shoulders slumped.

Seems like Datil’s Cell Manipulation has a cooldown. Okay, then! Sorry to steal your thunder, but I’ll activate Shackle!

Ding! “Shackle has been activated. Please be careful of your surroundings.”

Looks like I had a full understanding of my new abilities too. *This is odd, but I guess this is how it goes.*

The curse card created chains linking me to Fresa and Datil. They kept jingling.

I’m the only one that can see these chains. They’re proof of my bonds that can never be broken.

“Apple-san, is this...?” Fresa gasped.

“I get it! This was how we were connected!” Datil exclaimed.

You guys can see this? Ha ha ha! I get it now! You guys think of me so much that these chains are visible to you!

“Apple-san, take care of that queen!” Fresa said as she placed me on the ground.

“Fine. I guess I’ll leave the finishing blow to you!” Datil said with a grin.

All right, here I go! This is the end! Funerary Shackles!

Ding! “Activating Funerary Shackles. The coffin will appear in: 30...29...28... Please be wary of your surroundings. I repeat, please be wary of your surroundings. 24...23...”

The queen was writhing in pain, unable to pay any attention to me. “Raaaagh! It hurts! It hurts! The roots! The roots!”

Now, I'll send you off. Dragging the chains behind me, I approached the queen.

"A-Another fruit?! S-Stop! Get away! Not an inch closer! Stop..." the queen cried as she fearfully backed away.

I won't let you escape! I started rolling around the queen, wrapping the chains around her.

"What's going on? Why are you rolling around me?! Stop! Stop! Stooooop!" She couldn't see the chains that proved the strength of our bonds.

You're about to get dragged into our destiny and die.

Ding! "The Funerary Shackles will now be deployed. Join your hands together in prayer. For those attending the cremation, a bus has been prepared for you. Please board immediately."

As the horn sounded, the chains went taut, and the queen was crushed into little pieces.

Just because the queen was defeated, it doesn't mean the other ants would magically disappear. This isn't a video game, after all.

Datil began to speak. "Fresa-san, they're—"

"All deaaaad?" Fresa said. Indeed, every single ant had perished.

We're lucky they didn't just disappear into thin air. Let's collect them all. Grida, could you please?

"Furutsu, why did the ants all die?" Grida asked as they began to vanish.

You got them all at once? You're amazing, Grida. Anyway, yeah, this is the effect of the Funerary Shackles. It doesn't just affect the target, but anyone that would mourn the target's death too. They all get taken away by a bus.

"A bus?"

Oh, uh, you don't have to worry about that bit. Since the ants must've had a queen-and-child relationship, there probably aren't any alive still.

"That's a little scary, isn't it?"

I agree. This essentially means that I could kill a bunch of random things in one fell swoop. This time around though, we needed to defeat all the ants in the colony, so it worked out.

We decided to head back to meet with the party that escaped to the lower floors.

Ah, Grida. Let's leave the ants in this room alone. Don't collect them.

"Huh? Why?"

This is around where the ants first popped up. Do you remember?

Those three mean guys got dragged into this room.

“Oh, yeah!”

A lot of other adventurers were around then too. If we don't leave the corpses of the ants that killed them, it wouldn't make sense!

“You're sharp, Furutsu!”

“Ah, Datil. That outfit's no good,” Fresa noted.

“Yeah. Jeez, what should I do?” Datil replied.

“Be careful of how you talk, okaaay? This has to be a secret!”

“Yeah, yeah, I understand, Fresa-san.” Holmer had died. To make sure that became a fact, he needed to transform into a completely different person—Datil.

“Hmmm, okaaay, how about a helmet that covers your face and an eye patch?” Fresa suggested.

“No, that would just make me seem even more suspicious.”

In other words, we can't leave a scrap of evidence. Hey, Grida, why don't we give Datil some armor that might fit him from the storage card?

“Okay!” There was a pause before Grida sounded confused. “Uh, huh?”

What's wrong?

“A box suddenly appeared next to me. I've never seen it before.”

A box? Next to you, as in inside the storage box? A box within a box? What's going on?

“Um, there's some kinda writing in a language I don't understand, and a picture. It looks like putting something in the big box will make a round sparkly thing!”

Hmmm? You put something in and get a round sparkly thing? Does it have something to do with your new abilities? You got Isolation Barrier and Coin Creation, right? That box might...

“Be a part of my Coin Creation?”

Yeah. Anything else notable about that box?

“Ummm, oh! There's a number on it. ‘100,’ I guess.”

A number? The picture made it seem like you insert something, right? Grida, can you put something in that box? Uh, how about the ant corpses? We've got a lot of them, so let's try it out.

“Okay. In we go!”

Ding! Clack. Clack. Clink!

What was that sound?!

“Furutsu, the number went down by one!”

Hm, interesting! What happens when it reaches zero? Okay, wait a bit. I left Fresa's hand and rolled on the ground.

“Huuuh? What's wrong, Apple-san?” Fresa asked.

Nothing, just getting some space just in case anything happens. I know you can't hear me, but look at you, you're staying away regardless! I'm not sure why you always get the idea of what I'm going for, but it's convenient.

Grida, I know it's a hassle, but could you put in ninety-nine more of those corpses?

"Sure! I can put them all in at once, so it's not a hassle at all! Here we go!"

How are you moving around in that box? I'm a bit curious.

Ding! Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clink!

What's going on?

"Furutsu, look! Something's appearing in front of Fresa-san!"

Huh? What?

"G-Gold?! What's this all about?" Fresa cried. In front of her was a floating gold coin, about the size of a hundred yen coin from my world.

Is this the effect of Coin Creation?

"Huh? It's an ability to just make money?" Grida said.

No, this isn't a bad thing. But a hundred ant corpses only gets us one little gold coin? Maybe we'd turn a better profit if we sell them as is?

"Apple-san, are you giving this to me?" Fresa asked.

Right, if a gold coin suddenly appeared in the air, you'd probably think it's because of me. Why did Grida's ability materialize in front of Fresa anyways?

Fresa reached her arm out towards the gold coin. The moment her fingertips touched it, a rustic box suddenly appeared.

"Furutsu, that's the box I'm in," Grida said.

I see. It does look familiar—that's the box in the storage card. I don't have any hands, so I can't pull anything out.

Ding Ding! "Hoard Lottery will now begin."

Wait, that announcement... That's Fresa's ability! So what's this box for?

"How odd," Grida said.

Yeah. Normally, you should be able to pull out whatever you like from that box, but, well, no hands. For the past few days, I've been taking this box out, but I really couldn't reach inside.

"It's a box, isn't it?" Fresa asked.

"It's a box, yeah," Datil replied.

Fresa? Datil? You guys can see it too?! My storage box ability should be abstract. It shouldn't have a concrete form! Why can you see it? Maybe it's got something to do with that announcement!

"It said, 'Hoard Lottery will now begin,' didn't it?" Grida said.

Upon closer inspection, that box is actually a little different.

"What's that hole?"

That's gotta be a coin slot that you'd normally see on vending machines. I think everyone from my world would think the same. There's a lever and change tray on the bottom too.

"A vending machine?"

Yeah. You put money into it, and an item comes out. It's like a store with no staff.

"Wow! That sounds so cool!"

I agree. It's cool, but why does it have a coin slot? Wait, I get it now! That's where you put that coin!

"Am I supposed to put the coin into that box?" Fresa asked.

"I believe that's the only sensible course of action," Datil politely replied.

Oooh, Datil's getting used to speaking in a more reserved tone.

"Whaaat? But the apple gave me this coin!"

"I'm sure it has something amazing in mind."

Uh, wait, I don't know what's gonna happen here either.

"All right, I'll put it in then, okay?"

Clink!

The coin went inside the box with a satisfying clink, which was followed by a dinging sound and a voice.

Ding! "Starting the Hoard Lottery!"

A drumroll played and the box lit up with completely unnecessary flair and a sudden voice.

Beep! Beeeep! Tweet! Tweet! Beep! Beep! Tweet! Tweet!

"Yaaaaay! What item will appear today? Let's see! No backsies even if it's not the item you want! Boom chaka boom boom!"

What is this, a samba?

"Wh-What? What's going on heeere?!" Fresa cried.

"A-Apple-san! What is this?!" Datil yelled.

I don't know either! What is this? What happened?!

"And baaaam!" came the voice. The drumroll stopped and the light show ended. After a moment of silence, a spotlight illuminated the box. The lid popped open, and a large round object flew out.

Plop! Roll. Roll. Roll. Click!

The object popped open on its own. *I feel like I've seen this before.*

"Dun da da duuuuuun! Congratulations! You've won item number 17904020481, SSR, Loga's Leather Armor!"

"That surprised me! What just happened? What's an SSR?" Fresa asked.

"Loga's Leather Armor? Is it this thing?" Datil said.

Both of you saw and heard that announcement and fanfare. I feel like those Cards of Fate are becoming more open to others...but never mind that now. Grida, is that armor—

"Yep, this armor was inside the box with me! I couldn't take it out!"

I knew it! My storage card has a bunch of items that the previous owner left behind. But neither of us were able to take them out.

"I can only remove things that I stored myself."

Your Coin Creation and Fresa's Hoard Lottery let us randomly remove items we couldn't get out from the storage! That's a really OP ability, isn't it?!

"It looks like normal leather armor," Datil said.

"But it went 'congratulations!' Wait, there's a piece of paper here."

Oh yeah, a piece of paper did come with the armor. What does it say? Whoa, is it the armor's specs?

Loga's Leather Armor: SSR

Armor made from the skin of the Demon Lord, Loga, who ruled a different world known as Em Es Ex.

The armor may look like normal leather, but its defense and magic defense are god-tier.

The armor will snugly fit the user's body type.

Defense: 11316

Magic Defense: 10018

Self-regenerates

Resist: Heat

Resist: Cold

Resist: Thunder

Resist: Water

Nullify: Petrify

Nullify: Instant death

Someone made armor from the Demon Lord's skin after beating it? What was next on the agenda, some hidden boss? Whatever. Those numbers and the description are impressive. Is it really that powerful though? I don't have a good comparison, so I can't tell.

"Different world?"

"Demon Lord's skin?"

See, look, Fresa and Datil are both tilting their heads. Wait, Grida, didn't we pick up some metal armor a while ago?

"Yeah. Ummm, here it is."

Oh, you don't need to take it out. I'll just select it from this list. I knew it, I can see the armor's stats. Let's see...

Steel Full-Plate Armor

Steel armor meant for the entire body. Due to its high defense against physical attacks, it's very heavy.

Defense: 28

Magic Defense: 2

Weakness: Thunder

Slows user by 68%

Wait, what? That strong looking steel armor only has 28 defense?! If this were a game, Loga's Leather Armor is like armor meant for the final boss!

"Huuuh? Apple-san looks surprised at something," Fresa said.

Huh? I have no face. How can you tell that I'm surprised?

"Is it maybe surprised by the stats of this armor? It does say 'god-tier,' so I can only assume it's extraordinary," Datil said.

Yeah. That's the jackpot. I rolled around Datil's feet.

"I knew it. This armor also makes me look like a young newbie adventurer. I should change into this immediately."

I see now. It looks like a normal piece of armor, so it's perfect for a disguise. I didn't think an item of this caliber would pop out so easily though. Coin Creation and Hoard Lottery sure are impressive. I guess God did say that there was a possibility that the storage card might still have stuff from the hero that beat the Demon Lord, so there might even be other amazing items in here too. Okay, Grida. Could you please exchange all the ant corpses for those coins?

"Phew. I'm done!" Grida said.

Thank you! There sure were a lot of them, weren't there?

Grida had created seven coins from seven hundred of the normal ant corpses, and one coin from the five bodyguard ants with her ability—eight in total.

"I guess this doesn't work with other items," Grida added.

Yeah. Seems like our opponents have to be decently strong, or your box won't accept them.

We had tried to add unnecessary items and weak demons' corpses into the Coin Creation box, but we only heard a buzzer sound followed by the inserted item being spit out. We didn't try this on anything valuable, on the chance it could get lost forever.

Okay, we've prepared what we could! Let's aim for some rare items!

"I'm sure this box has other valuable items! I'll take them all for myseelf!" Fresa cried.

Oh, you're into this! Okay, put those coins in for us, please!

"Let's gooo!"

Gooooooo!

"Wait a second, Fresa-san—and probably you too, Apple-san!" Datil interrupted us right before we got started. "Now isn't the time for this, is it?!"

Tsk, so you noticed. You're pretty sharp, Datil.

"Datiil, it's important to go with the flow for these things, you know? We got an amaaazing item, so now's our chance!"

Datil was wearing Loga's Leather Armor now. It looked normal at a glance, but it was a rare item with incredibly high stats. We call this "winning it big."

"I understand your stance here, but we must hurry. I'm worried about the situation on the lower floors."

He's right. There's no guarantee that Elumichai and the rest of our group are safe on the fourth floor. Even though the Funerary Shackles killed the ants...

"There are other demons down there. We should hurry to confirm their safety," he continued.

"Hmmmmmm. I guess so," Fresa said with a sad look. She put the coins in her pocket.

"Ummm, could you take this for me, Apple-san?" Datil asked.

Roger that. Grida, could you store Datil's old armor? Also, could you pull out all the swords we've collected? Ideally with their scabbards.

"Swords? Datil-san has his own," Grida said.

Yeah, and amateurs might not notice, but smart swordsmen like Zambarau and his former coworkers like Elumichai might immediately be able to tell that he's got Holmer's sword.

"What, really?"

Listen well, Grida. Humans can be weirdly clever when it comes to things they're good at. Oddly enough, they get extremely perceptive.

"I see! Then we *should* be careful!" Datil's armor disappeared, and six swords took its place.

"Oh, I'm glad you understand!" Datil exclaimed. He removed his sword and started choosing a weapon.

"Huh? Why is Apple-san taking out swords?" Fresa asked.

"If Elumichai or Zambarau sees, they'll know that I'm holding Holmer's sword."

See?

"You're amazing!" Grida said.

We started to descend the spiral staircase, collecting ant corpses along the way.

"Do you think they might have made their way outsiide?" Fresa asked.

"No, that's not possible. Elumichai is with them. In times like these, the best course of action is to remain put until you're absolutely sure that it's safe to move."

They probably didn't expect us to beat those ants so quickly. They must be hiding in a safe area somewhere.

"Just in case, let's go over our story. I'm Datil. You happened to save me, Fresa-san, and I lost some of my memory. I don't remember

anything other than my name.”

“I, the great apple sorcerer—with your help—managed to rout the ants. Buuut, as I delved farther into the colony, I found Holmer-san’s guild card. I assumed he’d been eaten! Then I’ll fall to the ground weeping!”

We thought there were a lot of ants, but there actually weren’t. I think saying “We killed five of them, and five more fled” should be enough to dodge the “Hero of the Land” title. We already exchanged all the other corpses for coins, so there’s no evidence and no witnesses.

“The rest is up to my verbiage and your acting.”

“Leave it to meee! I was the popular star of an acting troupe when I was a child!”

“I know. Oh, we’re on the fourth floor.” Datil stood on the ground that I burned a while back, and glanced around. “Why’s there a burnt circle on the ground?”

“Heh heh heh. This is the result of my genius strategy!” Fresa said proudly.

I feel like you just took all the credit, but whatever. Grida, see anything?

“Nope, nothing around here,” she replied.

Gotcha. They shouldn’t have gone far, so let me know if you see anything, okay?

“Okay!”

We moved forward, staying alert. This floor was pretty similar to the third—it was basically one long path.

“Furutsu! I see them! They’re back there!”

Hm? Where? Ah, they’ve expertly blocked this passageway. It only looks like a wall to me.

“Huh? Apple-san?” Fresa said.

I rolled off of Fresa’s hands and tackled the wall. It crumbled, and we heard a familiar voice.

“Entreat the moon and unchain the wind. Envelop the unseen, return into dust, and be unmade. Wind magic!”

Whoa, watch out! You cut me a little! Your wind magic’s amazing, Zambarau!

Ding Ding! “Detected an unknown spell and activation of magic. This will be registered in the magician card.”

Oh, nice! I got wind magic.

Ding Ding! “Successfully registered. Users will be Furutsu and Grida. Default strength set at fifty percent. Safety settings include the user, those in contact with the user, and [002] other listed entities.”

Ding Ding! “Successfully analyzed the spell. Incantation has been abbreviated for efficiency. Spell will now be: ‘Unchain the wind, entreat the moon.’ Because the spell has been made more effective and

powerful, default strength will be set at three percent.”

My new ability should also activate!

Ding Ding! “Detected wound on the outer layer. You have gained six percent resistance against wind magic. [6/100]”

Yes, I knew it! This is Resistant Outer Layer. I gain resistance towards any damage I take. Once I hit one hundred percent, I become completely immune.

“An apple? Is that you, Fresa?! Sorry, I fired because I thought you were a demon!” Zambarau said.

I can't blame you; you're in a tough situation. I can tell by everyone's faces.

“No, I'm fine! Are you all okay?” Fresa asked.

Zambarau wore a dark expression. “Yeah, but there were a lot of other demons that weren't ants. We're all alive, but Ciruela's horribly injured.”

“Holmer-san!” Elumichai said, running towards us. She had been treating Ciruela's wounds. “You're not him. Um, who are you?” Her smile slowly gave way to a worried expression.

“My name is Datil. Fresa-san saved me when I was being attacked by the ants. I'm sorry, I actually can't seem to remember anything else.”

Nice acting, Datil. You don't sound like an old man at all.

“I-I see. That must have been rough for you. Um, Fresa-san, where's Holmer-san?”

Fresa hung her head in silence, shaking it from side to side. Tears dripped onto the ground.

Whoa, Fresa! That's some amazing acting!

“Right in front of my eyes, Holmer-san...was... The ants, they...” Fresa choked on her words, her shoulders trembling as she desperately held back her sobs. She silently handed Elumichai Holmer's bloody guild card. The blood, of course, was Holmer's.

“N-No...” Elumichai's shoulders slumped.

Fresa started outright crying. Large tears rolled down her cheeks.

Wait! You're making me cry a little too!

“Fresa-san's amazing,” Grida said with surprise.

What's with her acting? It's mesmerizing.

Someone coughed from deeper in the room.

That's right, Ciruela's injured.

“My sadness won't bring back Holmer-san. I'll go treat Ciruela-san. Apple magic!” Fresa yelled, raising me above her head.

Good thinking. If Datil uses his water magic, it might remind someone of Holmer. Grida, if you would, please?

“Okay! Break the water's seal, thieves!”

Ding! “Spell confirmed. Activating at two percent strength.”

Grida's powerful magic went through me and a blue light gushed out.

"Amazing! The wounds are healing!" Everyone held their breath as Ciruela's injuries were repaired at an amazing speed.

"But this magic didn't work on Holmer-san. He was too badly hurt. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry, Holmer-san!" Fresa cried out again, and fell to the ground in tears. Datil put his hand on her shoulder.

"Furutsu, are you crying too?" Grida asked.

N-No, of course not! This is just apple juice!

A Brief Intermission: Elumichai's Report

Report on Guild Entrance Exam #5128: Comprehensive Test for Group C

Submitted by: Elumichai

Location: Chasm of Catastrophe

Primary Instructor: Holmer (KIA)

Sub-Instructor: Elumichai

Group C Members: Zambarau (Leader), Fresa, Ciruela, Sliva, Prunum

Details regarding our trek to the Chasm have been omitted due to lack of notable events. At the entrance of the Chasm, three adventurers heckled and tried to intimidate us: Arápiko (KIA), Cacahuete (KIA), Hypogaea (KIA).

The three mentioned above were discovered within the stomachs of the demons. Though it is customary to raise an adventurer's rank after their death, their promotions have been waived as penalties for their actions.

An unexpected incident occurred on the third floor of the chasm. Primary instructor had declared the exam to be suspended until further notice. Exam was not resumed again, and ended prematurely due to the death of the primary instructor. Immediately prior to the exam's suspension, the trio at the entrance, mentioned above, tried to intimidate our group once more. No other incidents occurred.

Sub-Instructor's grade based on the events:

Due to the circumstances, all members of the group have received special treatment. All members have passed, so I will refrain from grading each member individually.

Incident that caused the exam to be suspended (Level 2 Confidentiality):

1. Numerous demons appeared on the third floor (looked extremely similar to Sedel, who was tagged as B Class. It is assumed that these demons are of the same class. They shall be referred to as "Sedels" from now on, for simplicity's sake).
2. The primary instructor deemed this incident to be completely

- outside of expectations. We declared a suspension of the exam.
3. The party decided to escape from the testing area.
 4. Adventurers filled the passageway. The primary instructor quickly determined it was impossible to escape. Left with no other choice, the two instructors prepared to battle (at this point, we thought it was impossible for all five group members and both instructors to come back alive).
 5. Zambarau suggested we wait on the fourth floor for help. We agreed with his idea.
 6. We went from the second route to the eighth route and made it to the passage leading to the fourth floor.
 7. The primary instructor decided to remain in case a group of Sedels were to attack us from behind.
 8. We proceeded to use the stairs to go down to the fourth floor. No demons were found during our descent.
 9. We reached the fourth floor.
 10. We confirmed something falling from above. Upon closer inspection, we confirmed that it was the primary instructor's left...

"Holmer-san..." I muttered. It had been three days since I returned to the city of Kalabuya. I was writing my report regarding the entrance exam as ordered by the guildmaster. It wasn't too difficult to write up since the exam was cut short, but I didn't have enough time—it was due tomorrow.

"Elumichai-san. Can I take the documents regarding those three?" my coworker said.

"Huh? Um, sorry. Could you wait a little?" I replied.

How weird. It's very unlike me to not notice someone coming from behind. Just kidding, I know exactly why my mind's wandering. I knew that, mentally, I was still at the Chasm of Catastrophe.

"I'm sorry. Thank you for your patience," I said.

My coworker looked at me kindly, and took the documents from my hand before leaving. "I know you've been through a lot. Don't worry about it too much."

"Don't worry, huh?" I ran my hand idly across the paper, my mind still fully elsewhere. I was so used to writing these reports that unfortunately, I was still able to string together sentences that made sense even if my heart wasn't in it.

Holmer-san was dead. He was Rank A—a skilled, strong, and kind adventurer. "Death is a constant companion for adventurers. If you can do it today, you should do it today. If you can do it right now, do it right now!" he had said with a smile on his face. But he wasn't here

anymore. He was no longer with us.

“What can I even do...?” I mumbled. The only thing I could do for him now is to write this report. This is his final job. I should write it to the best of my ability.

“All right. Let’s take another pass at this!” I crumpled up the half-written report on my desk into a ball and threw it in the trash can.

Chapter 5: Return

I found myself at the Adventurers' Guild in Kalabuya. Group C's members, Elumichai the instructor, and Datil were all gathered in the guildmaster's room to discuss the recent incident.

"You did well, Elumichai. Good work protecting all the newbies."
So this is the guildmaster?

His face, arms, and presumably the rest of his body were covered in scars. He looked like he'd fought—and won—many battles. "We lost a good man. Is this what's left of him, Elumichai?"

Holmer's arm, wrapped in a cloth, was on the table.

"I also have his guild card. Here it is..." Elumichai handed over the card, which was coated in dark red blood.

"I can never get used to this," he sighed, staring at Holmer's card. "We'll put this in the coffin during tomorrow's funeral." He set it down alongside Holmer's arm. "Now then, let's listen to your report. Sit down."

The members of Group C sat on the sofa. Due to lack of space, Datil was given a wooden chair.

Elumichai was the first to speak. "Now, I will begin my report regarding the incident that occurred in the Chasm of Catastrophe. The first and second floors were—" She was cut off by a sudden noise that came from outside the window.

"What's going on?! Why's there a lesser dragon rampaging in the city?!"

"The tamer screwed up! Surround it and catch it!"

Seems like some sort of trouble. I can't see anything from here, but I can hear the cries of an animal—er, a demon. A few men are roaring at each other, trying to catch it. Are they okay?

"Ah, so a demon's loose. It happens often. If it's just a lesser dragon, we can leave them be. Continue with your report," the guildmaster said.

Seriously? This is a daily thing?! Fantasy-themed worlds are amazing!

"This concludes my report about the encounter with the ants, suspending the exam, and agreeing to retreat," Elumichai said.

The guildmaster couldn't hide his surprise as he listened to Elumichai's report. He was mumbling to himself.

We saw mountains of adventurers' corpses in the passageway. Yet we're more or less safe and came back alive. This is probably a miracle.

"We're alive thanks to Holmer-san. Had he not been with us, we would surely have become food for the demons," she added.

Out of the 147 adventurers that were in the Chasm of Catastrophe that day, less than forty made it back alive. Tomorrow's funeral was for all the adventurers that lost their lives in that chasm.

Elumichai continued. "Many ants that were in the same class as the man-eating ant demon Sedel, who was tagged a B Class, suddenly appeared. The passageway was packed with adventurers."

Though this is a rough estimate, it seems like monsters tagged B Class are about as strong as one Rank B adventurer.

Hm, that's easy to remember.

"Group leader Zambarau's idea was to escape to the lower floors. On our way down, Holmer-san stayed behind to allow us to flee. He died while fighting the ants."

Tears rolled down Fresa's cheeks.

Her acting's amazing. No one will suspect that Holmer made it back alive.

"Who confirmed his death?" the guildmaster asked.

Everyone turned to look at Fresa.

"You did? That's strange. You saw Holmer dying while fighting multiple demons. How did you make it back alive?"

The question we've been waiting for! Well, it's a predictable one to ask though.

"Holmer-san stayed on the third floor to give us time to flee. Once we arrived at the fourth floor, his arm..." Fresa paused, glancing at the cloth on the table. "His arm fell from above us."

She's like a completely different person when she's acting.

"I went against my group's wishes, and rushed up to the third floor."

The guildmaster furrowed his brow. "That's quite a selfish act there. You might've put your other party members in danger, and you would've simply been prey for the ants, no? That still doesn't explain why you're alive. Holmer, our Rank A adventurer, was overpowered. How did you—?" He was cut off by the ruckus outside.

"Wh-Why isn't my magic working?!"

"Wait, is it protected by a guardian? That's unusual. We'll have to use force!"

That lesser dragon still hasn't been captured?

"Jeez, they look so clumsy. They're not training enough," the guildmaster said with an annoyed expression.

Wait, something's off! I feel like I can hear screaming?

"Eeeek! Th-This isn't a lesser dragon! It's an actual baby dragon!"

“What?! There’s no way we can capture—aaaaaagh!”

The guildmaster scrunched his face and quickly rose. “A baby dragon?! They brought a baby dragon into the city?!”

Fresa stood up as well. She gently placed me on the table, and slowly made her way towards the window.

“What? What are you doing?!” he yelled.

“Holmer-san had stopped me before. He said we were amateurs—that we weren’t adventurers. He told me to leave things to him, a pro. So I never used this spell,” she said, spreading her arms. She whispered, “Activate King of Apples.”

Ding! “King of Apples has been activated. Please ensure that others are a safe distance away. Activating in: 10...9... You will feel a strong shock wave, please stand back. 3...2...1...” Five floating apples appeared: one just above each hand, and three over her head.

“It’s her apple magic!” Zambarau said. Everyone gasped.

“Apple? Is this some kind of party trick?” the guildmaster said, looking at the apples (and even me) skeptically.

Hey, don’t lump me in with those. But I understand his feelings. If someone just conjured apples out of nowhere, I’d think it was just a party trick too.

“Harden. High-speed rotation,” Fresa whispered.

Ding! “All apples will be hardened and be applied with high-speed rotation. 3...2...1... Upgrade complete.” Fresa whispered this so softly that no one could hear her upgrades. The five apples started rotating at an extremely fast speed.

“Huh?! What’s going on?” the guildmaster asked.

Fresa smiled and pointed at the baby dragon that was rampaging outside the window. “Apple Meteor!” The rotating apples around her flew at a breakneck speed towards the dragon.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Thud!

A sickly sound echoed.

Like I said, I don’t really have a good vantage point here. But given those noises, and the fact it’s all gone quiet out there, I can only assume that those apples punched holes straight through the thing and killed it instantly.



“Guildmaster, sir. A baby dragon is tagged A Class no matter how small its size, correct?”

The guildmaster, who had witnessed the entire event, wiped the sweat off his brow before finally speaking. “Indeed. Even a baby dragon that newly hatched will be tagged A Class once confirmed.” His face looked stiff. “Thanks to you, we didn’t have to think of a name for that thing.” He looked calm, but his face was twitching ever so slightly.

Fresa may have overdone it, but I’m glad he understands now.

“Ahem. Now, back on topic. Regarding this exam...”

Speaking of which, the guildmaster did say something odd.

“What do you mean?” Grida piped in.

Well, he called Fresa and the others “newbies.” They hadn’t passed the exams yet. That means...

“Everyone in Group C has passed. You all braved an emergency situation and came back alive. I’ll formally accept you into the guild.”

I knew it. Even from my perspective, this group is made up of excellent people.

“They’re all so strong,” Grida added.

Yeah, I agree. They even lived through a life-and-death situation. Not everyone can replicate their results.

“Life-and-death?”

This was an unprecedented crisis where over one hundred people died, yet everyone in this group survived. For lack of a better word, they were “lucky” enough to experience such a hopeless situation. I’m sure the guild would love to have people like these.

“Of course, I don’t mind if you decline. You all saw many people die in front of your eyes. I’m sure some of you can come to the conclusion that you don’t want to be involved with adventurers and the dangerous tasks they undertake,” the guildmaster said.

*You say that, but you’ve got **those** prepared already! Wow.*

He laid out a guild card on the table for every member of the group.

Everyone desperately wants that. If they get even a glimpse of this card, I’m sure none of them will decline the offer. You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?

“Now, you may take these cards. The moment you do, you will be an adventurer.”

The moment these words left his lips, everyone reached for their guild card without hesitation.

“Very well. You are all officially guild members. Wait for the other groups to return. We will conduct a meeting with further information then. If you’d like, go to the counter to inform them of

your participation. And..." he paused, glancing at Datil. "I'd like to discuss some additional matters with him. It has nothing to do with Group C, but I do think this isn't mere coincidence. If you wish, you may remain."

Only Elumichai and Zambarau elected to do so.

We need to be careful with Elumichai—since she and Holmer worked together—but Zambarau is pretty clever too. In other words, the most troublesome people stuck around.

"I thank you for your patience. You don't have your memories, correct?" the guildmaster asked Datil.

"Yes. My name is Datil. I only remember my name and how to fight. I can't remember anything else."

"Hm, I see. Ah, I apologize for my late introduction. My name is Pastèque. I'm sure you can tell, but I'm in charge of this guild here." He looked at Datil with a half-suspicious, half-trusting expression. "You said you remember how to fight. You look like a swordsman to me, but am I right? Would you kindly have a friendly match with me?"

"A friendly match, sir?"

Isn't this bad? Datil can change the way he talks, but if he fights, he might have some habits that'd give away his former identity as Holmer.

"We don't know when your memories will return. Worst case, they may never come back. If you don't have anything to prove your identity, it'd be troublesome, wouldn't it?" Pastèque took a wooden training sword out of a closet, and handed it to Datil. "I'm not just the guildmaster for my looks. I believe that I can understand a person by exchanging a few blows with them." He smiled, rather unfittingly for the situation. "I'd like to fight with you so that I may understand who you are. If it goes well, I'll issue you a guild card."

He can become an adventurer?! This is honestly a lucky break from the heavens! Or will he...?

Datil looked deep in thought. After a while, he slowly nodded. "I accept."

"Okay. Let's go to the training grounds. You seem to be rather skilled, so I'm looking forward to this."

We arrived at the melee combat ground that had been used for the exam, which was on an underground floor of the guild building. Fresa, Elumichai, Zambarau, some record keepers, and a few people who happened to be nearby were watching the match.

"Oho? Can we watch for a bit?"

"You may."

Datil took his sword from his waist and put it on the ground.

Pastèque gazed at the sword in wonder.

“It looks rather old, but it’s a good sword.”

“Thank you. But I haven’t a clue where I got it. I can’t remember if I bought it or received it from someone. Is it really that old?” Datil asked.

He’s not half bad at acting. He’s just as good as Fresa.

“Indeed. It must be at least one to two hundred years old. Wait, what’s this? One, two, three, four, five...eight! I’m surprised. It’s actually a lot older than it seems. It might be in the ‘ancient artifact’ class.”

Wait, wait, wait! Did this guy analyze that much with just a glance? I hope this doesn’t give us away!

“This sword has eight layers of antidegradation magic cast on it, but it’s about to wear off. I’ve never seen anything with more than three, nor have I seen magic this weak. You should have someone recast the spell for you,” he said with a smile, before returning the sword back to its original position. “I can refer you to a talented magician later.”

Thank goodness, he didn’t ask any odd questions.

We had found that sword in the Chasm of Catastrophe, most likely left there by one of the ants’ victims. *Of course it’s old. That sword was probably made in the same era as that stone signpost with those ancient warnings.*

“Now then, let’s get started. Are you ready?” Pastèque asked.

“Yes. Thank you,” Datil replied.

They stood facing each other in the center of the training ground. Each took on a fighting stance, gripping their wooden swords.

“Hm? You seem agitated. Is that hesitation due to your amnesia, or is it something else?”

Datil grunted in response.

He analyzed all that just from looking at Datil’s stance? That old man’s scary!

“Here I come! Raaah!” Pastèque yelled.

He’s so quick! I lost sight of him for a sec! Just how fast is he?!

“Gah!” Datil said, parrying the guildmaster’s sword.

“That’s not good! You’re getting even more hesitant! Or is this something different?” Pastèque continued his assault, and Datil could only defend himself.

He’s purposefully fighting clumsily so that Pastèque won’t suspect that he’s Holmer. That’s not all, though.

“Datil-kun, just what are you trying to hide? Sorry, but I’ll have you reveal yourself!”

He’s scary! He saw right through him!

Datil mustered up a shaky battle cry.

“Hah! That’s the spirit! Show me more! Come at me more! The more you try to hide, the more you’ll show yourself!” Pastèque parried every single one of Datil’s attacks, as though he were unraveling something. “You should’ve attacked from above. And for this one, you purposefully refrained from attacking from below, didn’t you? That attack was unnatural too. You wanted to thrust your sword there, didn’t you? I can tell! It’s no use hiding anything from me!”

“Ugh. Grrr!”

*Even if Datil tries to forcibly kill his fighting habits, he’s being read like an open book. Pastèque analyzes them as the attacks that he **wanted** to do. There’s no use hiding anything like this.*

“You tried to strike me down, but you purposefully stepped back a little. There, that attack! You would’ve parried instead of dodging, am I wrong? Why? Why are you leading with your left foot when you know you should lead with your right? Hm? Wait a second. This movement...” Suddenly, Pastèque looked shocked. “No! Wh-Why? You’re...”

“Huh? R-Raaaaaah!” Datil yelled.

He got found out this quickly?! This is bad. Our acting went down the drain!

“Furutsu, what should we do?!” Grida asked.

Well, Grida. Once everyone finds out about Datil becoming young again, all of the people bonded with the curse card will be in big trouble. That includes me, you, Datil, and Fresa. Okay, last-ditch effort, we’ll put everyone to sleep with magic and run. Darkness from below will...

“You’re young. Is that the reason?” Pastèque asked.

Huh?

“No, you don’t have to use your words. You know what to do, don’t you?”

“Pastèque-san!” Datil said.

This man knows that Datil’s actually Holmer—but even still, he still wants to know more about him.

“Come at me with pride! Speak with your sword!” Pastèque roared.

“Yes sir!” Datil changed his stance.

He’s gonna fight without hiding anything now.

“Ha ha ha! Good! You can’t tell me the truth if you don’t show me your true self!”

“I’m no match for you...”

The two men grinned at each other.

“Furutsu, why are they both smiling like that?”

Hm, they’re probably talking with their swords, a lot like how you and I usually talk. That smile was probably because Pastèque saw right through Datil’s lies.

“Hmmm... It's tricky for me to understand.”

I get it. Honestly, I'm not quite sure myself. In fact, I'm sure the only people that truly understand are the two going at each other right now.

“Now then, I want to hear the details. I'll start easy. Hah!”

Pastèque said.

Whoa! That wasn't easy at all! I could hear him cut the wind from here!

The moment Pastèque took his second step forward, Datil took a step of his own, and their swords clashed. A thudding noise reminded me that those two were using wooden training swords. Their incredible speed and amazing slashes made it look as though their blades were still metal.

“Oho? I don't know what happened, but you're strong,” Pastèque noted. He'd phrased his words carefully. If he'd said that Datil had “gotten stronger,” it would imply that he had known Datil in the past. Even if the people present let this slip by, the written records would surely serve as proof.

“Datil, show me your power! Show me your abilities! The only thing that'll convince me is striking without hesitation!”

Seems like Pastèque's treating Datil as though they'd just met for the first time.

“Raaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Datil yelled.

“Ha ha! I see! I'm getting it now! Do it again! That's right! Keep them coming!” Pastèque kept dodging Datil's attacks by a hair's breadth, showing off his skill.

The audience, meanwhile, was chattering in admiration.

“I see. I've got the rough idea now,” Pastèque said.

Really?! You do?!

“I have a rough idea, but I can't just let you go with a nod. I have my position to think of!”

Yeah, that makes sense. You shouldn't be a guildmaster if you're that agreeable.

“So this isn't enough! I'm still not sure where this strength of yours is coming from!”

Datil's got the Cell Manipulation ability he gained from the “curse” card. For a brief moment, he can move at inhuman speeds.

“You see through me completely,” Datil said with a forced laugh.

Did Pastèque find out that Datil could use Cell Manipulation? It's strong enough that it let him fight head-to-head with the queen ant.

“You decided to throw everything away... I'll have you show me your resolve.”

“Pastèque-san...”

“If you can weather my next attack, I'll issue you a guild card, as promised. I'll even throw in a little bonus for you,” he said with a

grin. Holding his sword in one hand, he raised it towards the sky, before bending down slightly and laying his other hand flat on the ground.

What a weird stance.

“A-Ahhh! No way!” Zambarau suddenly cried.

Oh right, you were here.

“That stance... It has to be the hidden technique of the Genbu sword style, the Heaven and Earth Destructive Slash! This space is way too cramped! Is he really going to do it in the middle of the city?! This will be a disaster!”

Oooh, so we’re getting a super move?! Also, that’s some impressive knowledge!

“It’s been about ten years since I’ve done this move against a human,” Pastèque said.

“Heh, give me a break.” Datil was smiling, but his brow was covered in cold sweat.

The human on the receiving end of that move ten years ago was you, wasn’t it?!

“I suppose I must defend against this with everything I have,” Datil said.

“Please do, or half the city will be destroyed.”

Why are you so casual about this?! You shouldn’t be the guildmaster after all!

“Here I go! Cell Manipulation!” Datil yelled.

Ding! “Cell Manipulation’ activated. Remaining time: 59...58...57...”

Upon seeing Datil activate his ability, Pastèque grinned from ear to ear. He pointed his wooden sword downwards and swung. “Here I go! Heaven and Earth Destructive Slash!”

The sword went straight into the ground, the hard surface cut through like powdery snow. He took a huge step forward with his right leg, and used his hand on the ground to pivot around and slash in a straight line towards Datil.

Rumble. Rumble. Booooooooooom!

The sound echoed into the pits of our stomachs, as a fissure in the earth erupted at an amazing speed, heading right towards Datil.

“As I am now, I should be able to use this move. Here I go! The Blue Dragon is always by our side!” Datil chanted, closing his eyes. His eyes suddenly flew open, and he took the wooden sword with both hands, thrusting the blade towards Pastèque.

“Huh?! That’s the super hidden technique of the Blue Dragon Sword! I thought it was lost to time!” Zambarau yelled, even more shocked than before.

Wait a second. Why do you know about a hidden technique of a

sword style that was lost to time?

“Blue Dragon Sword: Droplet.”

Out of nowhere we could hear the sound of rushing water, as a blue light shot out from Datil’s wooden sword.

Fwoom! Fwooooooosh!

The sound of a vortex of water boomed throughout the room. It was as if a dam had burst; an incredible amount of water surged forth from Datil.

“Huh? Furutsu, there’s so much water!” Grida cried.

Both of their moves are amazing! These are practically natural disasters!

Datil’s jet of water and Pastèque’s slash clashed against each other and both fizzled into thin air.

“H-Huh? The water’s gone,” Grida said.

Yeah. For a split second, I could’ve sworn I saw a jet of water! I guess that was an illusion. Unbelievable! Datil thrust so many times at lightning speed that it looked like a stream of water gushing out!

“Ah! Well done, Datil. To think you were able to cancel out my attack,” said Pastèque.

“Thank you, Pastèque-san!”

They grinned at each other.

You don’t need to do that friendly handshake thing that people do at the end! Fight with the city in mind!

“As promised, I’ll prepare a guild card for you. And as for the bonus, well...lend me your ear for a moment.”

He leaned in and whispered into Datil’s ear. Datil stiffened and quietly nodded before calling out to us. “Could you please wait a little? I’ll be right back.” Leaving those words behind, he left the training grounds with Pastèque.

“Furutsu, what happened with Datil-san?” Grida asked.

Did Pastèque ask him to come alone? If so, why?

“Ack! Maybe he got figured out, and they’re gonna use him as a human experiment!”

Nah, I don’t think so. Pastèque was aware of his true identity, and still kept it secret. We should wait until he comes back...

“Apple-san, go on!” Fresa said.

Huh?

“Hurry! Follow him and eavesdrop for us!”

Eavesdrop? You can’t be serious.

“Pleaaase? They’ll find out if I follow them! Aren’t you worried about them too?”

Well, yeah, but... Ugh, fine. Just a little.

Roll. Roll. Roll.

“Why don’t you have a seat? I won’t bite,” Pastèque said.

“Yes, sir.”

I could hear their voices from behind this thick door.

“No one will bother us here. It’s completely soundproof.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

Heh heh, you newbies. I don’t need my ears—I can pick up sound waves using my cells. My super hearing can’t be stopped by this soundproof room.

“Jeez, don’t surprise an old man that much,” the guildmaster groaned.

“That wasn’t my intention,” Datil replied, sounding troubled.

Yeah, I didn’t think he’d see through us so easily either. He’s extremely observant.

“It’s not just me. If you stay in this city, someone else will definitely find out about your identity.”

Exactly. Astute observations aside, Holmer lived in this city for a long time. Just because he got younger, introducing him as a completely different person is pushing it. It’s impossible to fake behaviors, habits, the way he talks, and even his taste in food.

Datil sighed. “I suppose so. Dear me, I was pretty confident in my acting.”

“Ha ha, I suppose it’s just like riding a bike for you. But acting is just that: acting. You’ll give yourself away sooner or later.”

Sometimes, I think about how these words get translated for me. I’m sure this world doesn’t have any bikes. Well, whatever, I guess.

“I’d like to ask more questions about you, and that young girl who uses her odd apple magic, but...” Pastèque paused as though he were deep in thought. “I doubt you’d talk. And as you know, I won’t do meaningless things.”

“Yes,” Datil said, a little apologetically.

Pastèque exhaled and lowered his voice, getting to the meat of the conversation. “You’re going to leave the city, aren’t you? Do you have a place to go?”

“No, not yet.”

He really did see right through us. As Pastèque had guessed, we had decided to go on a journey. If we were to stay here, Datil’s identity may get exposed.

“You’ve got no place to go, and you’re going on a trip with a young girl, are you? Aren’t you a lucky guy? Ha ha ha!”

“Ah ha ha... Please give me a break.” Datil responded with a dry laugh.

I’m sure this joke is received a lot differently than it would be in my

world. We're always alongside death here. Going on a journey in this world is far more unforgiving. It's unimaginable to me.

"So here's the bonus I was talking about. How about this?"

"R-Really?!" Datil stammered.

I see. That would in fact be the best parting gift ever, I thought as the guildmaster continued talking. We'll definitely need it on our journey.

Okay, I'll go back to Fresa and...huh? Wait a sec.

"What's wrong, Furutsu?" Grida asked.

Fresa asked me to eavesdrop, but what's the point?

"Huh? What do you mean?"

I can't talk. There's no way I can tell her what I heard.

"Ack!"

Well, whatever. I feel at ease now, I guess. I'll get back to Fresa and have her go "ack!" after she realizes her mistake.

Roll. Roll. Roll.

Shortly after Fresa went "ack!" and realized her error, Datil returned and explained the bonus.

"So the guildmaster said he'd lend us money we'd need for our journey."

"Whaaat?! I shouldn't have worried about you then!" Fresa replied.

However, it seems that he didn't give her all the details.

I don't know why he didn't explain it to her in full, but he got the general idea across. It bothers me a bit, but I guess it's not too much of a problem.

Afterwards, we returned to the inn that Fresa used as her base.

"I'll use my sleeping bag today, so you can use the bed, Fresa-san," Datil said.

It goes without saying, but there's no way Datil can return to his former room. Unfortunately for us, thanks to the incident at the Chasm of Catastrophe, a bunch of important folks had come to town—and many other visitors besides—to participate in the mass funeral that was set for tomorrow. Of course, this meant that all the inns were packed. With no other place to go, Datil decided to sneak in with Fresa.

"Huuuh? Why don't we sleep together? Just kidding!" Fresa said, bouncing on her bed.

Hey, Fresa! Don't be so rowdy! We might get kicked out, you know?!

"Wh-What are you saying?! Hey! Pipe down!" Datil said.

This world's lodging system only allows one person per room. You can't even let a second person enter. The reasoning is simple: if there's only one person per room, there's no worry about any...suspicious

activities happening.

In other words, any inn that doesn't allow more than one person per room also prohibits those kinds of suspicious activities. This world's oddly uptight.

"Furutsu? What do you mean by 'those kinds of activities'?" Grida asked.

Uh, nothing. It's got nothing to do with us, Grida.

"That's not true, is it?"

Jeez, Fresa's always so rowdy. Is she a kid or something? Huh? Grida, did you say something?

"Heh heh, it's nothing!"

You sure? I just felt a shiver down my spine.

"Datil..." Fresa said suddenly, with a straight face. She looked at Datil, teary-eyed.

"Fresa-san, quit joking and pipe down. You don't want to get caught now, do you?" he whispered.

"But I can't contain myself any longer! Pleaaase!"

"Agh, no! W-Wait a moment, please!"

Speaking of which, Datil remained surprisingly polite towards Fresa during that match with Pastèque today.

"Datil, please! I've always, always..."

"N-No! Ack, wait! They could hear us next door!"

Huh? Whoa there! Hold on a sec! Our title for this book is clearly aimed towards younger folks! The cover looks super cute too! Children might accidentally pick this up! Stop, Fresa!

"Title? Cover?" Grida asked.

Uh, nothing.

Fresa inched towards Datil. "Come on, just a little bit? I'll be sure to stay quieeeet!"

That's really not the point here! This isn't good in all sorts of ways!

"Fine. But promise me that you'll actually be quiet, okay?"

Huuuuuuuh?! Datil, I thought we were on the same team here! Stop it, you guys! Stoooooop!

"Eh heh, hooray! Let's have some fun!" Fresa said, as she took out the eight gold coins.

Ding! "Starting the Hoard Lottery."

Oh, that's what you meant?! You scared me! I thought...

"Thought what?" Grida asked.

Uh, er, nothing. Yeah, it's got nothing to do with us.

There was a pause. "Like I said, that's not true, is it?"

Fresa gave a big smile and inserted the coins into the box. The cheerful announcement and drumroll followed. It seems like we're the only ones who can perceive the sounds and lights coming from this box, so we can do this lottery anywhere provided that Fresa keeps her

voice down.

Hey, Grida, did you just say something?

"Nope."

Oh, okay. I felt another chill down my spine. Am I coming down with a cold?

"Okay, here I gooo!" Fresa said.

All riight! Legendary item, come on!

U-Ughhhhhh. I-Is this the fabled "desire sensor" at work?!

"Keep it together, Furutsu!" Grida said.

The fabled desire sensor, by the way, is an in-game "mechanic" that prevents you from getting whatever rare item you're actually going for. Grida's eight coins were disappearing inside the box.

So far, we've rolled...

Stubborn Grandpa Fae's Cane "N"

A cane owned by an old man two houses away.

"I'll never use this cane!" he had stubbornly said.

As such, this is like new.

Attack (Physical): 2

Assists in walking

Super Stomach Medicine "N"

Stomach medicine that contains many medicinal herbs.

Effective against acid reflux, heartburn, and stomach bloat.

Health restore: 5

Soap of the Wise "N"

A normal bar of soap used by a famous wise person.

Half-used.

Cleanliness: 2

Orichalnocum Knife "N"

If you read the name real fast, you may mistake it for a knife made out of the legendary "orichalcum."

A normal knife.

Decked out with luxurious looking jewels, but they're all made out of glass.

Forged by a person named Orichal Nocum.

Attack (Physical): 3

Phoenix's Plate "N"

This steak chain restaurant named itself based on the legendary bird.

This plate comes from the restaurant. There's a picture of Phoenix-kun, their mascot, imprinted in the center.

Attack (Physical): 2 (when thrown)

Gaaaah!!! We've gotten nothing good! Why do we have so much junk in here anyways? Was the previous owner a hoarder?!

"Are you okay, Furutsu?" Grida said.

Y-Yeah. It's all right! We've still got three coins left! Begone evil thoughts, and insert the coins with a clear mind!

"Raaaaaaaagh! Noooooooooo! The next roll will be good! I can feel it..." Fresa huffed.

Doesn't matter if my mind is clear if Fresa's acting like that!

"She kinda reminds me of you," Grida said.

What?! Where? How? I'm not like that, am I? I'm calm and collected and smart! How am I like her, with her overactive imagination? How are we alike at all?!

"Gooooo!" Fresa said. The drumroll played again.

Ack! Fresa, wait! Did you already put the coin in?! You can't do that! You need a clear conscience, or the sensor will get you!

"Come on! Please! Rare item! Treasuuure!"

The drumroll stopped. **Bam!**

Large Pot "N"

Large pot that's useful when cooking for many people. Compatible with induction stove tops.

Defense: 15 (when equipped on head)

Magic Defense: 1 (when equipped on head)

Inflicts Blind (when equipped on head)

"Aaaaaaack!" Fresa and I yelled in unison.

"Yeah, I think you guys really are alike," Grida said.

Sorry, what was that? Anyways, let's do this again! Come on! Rare item, please!

"I've got two more coins. Two more coins!" Fresa seethed.

"Fresa-san, stop! Calm down. It's no good if you get too heated up when you're gambling," Datil said.

Huh?! He's right! We've got to clear our minds! Be free of all other thoughts!

"Huh? Datil?! Y-You're right. I wasn't thinking about anything when I first rolled Loga's Leather Armor. Okay, I'll calm down. Here we go!"

Clink!

The coin made a metallic sound and rolled into the box.

Ding! “Starting the Hoard Lottery!”

We heard the drumroll again, and the box lit up, illuminating its surroundings.



Beep! Beeeep! Tweet! Tweet! Beep! Beep! Tweet! Tweet!
“Yaaaaay! Are we all having fun today? What item will come out next? The show isn’t over yet! And heeere it is! Bum Bum Badabum Bang Bang Cha Cha Cha!”

Why do they have to make a whole show out of it?!

“And baaaam!” The drumroll stopped, and a large round ball came out of the illuminated box.

Plop! Roll. Roll. Roll. Click!

Fire Dragon’s Hair Decoration “R”

A hair decoration made out of a scale of a Fire Dragon.

It’s slightly resistant to fire.

Defense: 1

Magic Defense: 2

Slightly Resistant: Fire

“We did iiiiiit!” Fresa and I yelled together.

“See, you guys are alike,” Grida said.

Fresa took her new item and put it in her hair, flashing a mischievous smile. “Heh, I get the trick now! Last coin, let’s gooo!”

All riight! Come on! Luck is on our side right now! We’ve got a chance, Fresa! Gooooo!

Clink!

The drumroll started. *Look, Grida! Doesn’t the performance from the box sound a bit different this time?*

“Really? It sounds the same to me.”

The drumroll ended with a “Baaaam!”

Spring Cheese “N”

Every time you try to eat it, it springs from your grasp. You’ll never get to eat the cheese.

More of a joke item than a food item.

Irritation: 8

“Aaaaaack!” Fresa cried.

Noooooooooooo!

“Eh heh, you two are funny,” Grida giggled.

Damn it! Okay, last resort. Grida, put in the queen!

“Huh?”

Put the queen ant’s corpse in the box!

“Huh, are you sure?!”

Of course I am! We can’t turn back now!

“Turn back to where?”

I don't know, but that's not the point! Just roll with it!

“Hmmm, but will she get us a gold coin all on her own?”

Those five bodyguard ants got us one. Wouldn't you think the queen herself would be at least as valuable?

“Okay, here I go!”

Ding! Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack. Clink!

“Wow, the number on the box is really going down fast! It's all the way to zero now!” cried Grida.

A single ant only decreased it by one, but the queen made it go down to zero! Good, just as I'd thought!

“F-Furutsu, the box is glowing!”

Huh? What's going on?

Grida and I heard a fanfare play. “A rare life-form has been confirmed. A bonus coin will be produced.” A gold coin with a completely different design appeared in front of Fresa.

“Huh? A coin with a blue rim?” she said.

“Fresa-san, this coin is clearly different from the ones we've been using,” Datil said. The coin let off a weird shine and was decorated with a blue trim.

Maybe it increases our chances of rolling a rare item?

“Heh heh heh! Okay! Here I go!” Fresa said, snatching the coin. She posed for a second, and then inserted the coin into the box.

Clink!

Boom! Boom! Boom! Baboom! Baboom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Huh? This isn't the normal sound effect.

Boom! Boom! Baboom! Thud! “Hup!” Baboom! Thud! Thud! Boom! Clack! Clack!

*Is this the sound of a taiko drum? This does **not** fit with our setting!*

Tweet! Tweet! Tweet! Baboom! Baboom! Boom! Boom! Thud! Thud! Baboom! Boom!

Sounds like a whole festival in there.

“Uhhh, testing, testing, 1, 2, 3!” **Squeaaaaak!** “Agh, shut up! Testing! Testing!” **Squeaaaaak!**

Adjust your mic! Maybe take it off speakerphone or something!

“Uh, ahem! Everyone, this is the highlight of the Hoard Lottery! It's now time for a special lottery with the bonus coin! The bonus coin this time is the blue coin. You will be guaranteed an SR or better!”

Yessss! I knew it!

“First, I'd like to give a huge thanks to the queen ant, who helped us create this bonus coin. Round of applause, everyone!”

Why does this sound like one of those small town festivals? You sound like the mayor or something.

“Now, let's start the...” **Squeaaaaak!**

Your mic! Adjust your mic!

“Hoard Lottery!”

Do you not care anymore?!

Poof! Fwoooooosh!

Ah, sounds like fireworks. But why?

Fwoooosh! Kaboom!

The sky's filled with fireworks! Woohoo! What's with these effects?!

“Fresa-san, something's falling from the sky!” Datil said.

“Huh?!” Fresa cried. “That's...”

No wait, we're in a room! There isn't a sky here!

A large ball fell from the night sky, shining bright from the fireworks.

Plop! Roll. Roll. Roll. Click!

The ball opened up. “Bum Bum Bum Baaam! Congratulations! You've won item number 12240055919, SR, Perukunas's Mantle!”

A maroon cloak, huh? It has a hood though, so it's more like a poncho to me. Looks like we get a manual for this too. Let's see...

Perukunas's Mantle “SR”

Protects the user from all lightning attacks. If someone touches the user with malicious intent, a lightning bolt will strike them down, its power relative to the amount of malice.

Defense: 188/188

Magical Defense: 1024/1024

Slightly Resistant: Fire

Resistant: Cold

Nullify: Lightning

Counterattack: Lightning

“Yaaaaaay! Datil, look! We got a good one!” Fresa cheered.

It's not as good as Loga's Leather Armor, but it's pretty good!

“Glad to hear. Wait, huh? What are you doing?!” Datil yelled.

“Huh? I thought I'd try it on...”

Are you an idiot? Don't strip right here! Why do you move so quickly?

“Argh! That's what I'm talking about! Don't do that outside, you hear?!” Datil turned around, his face red.

“Huuuh? Of course I won't! That'd be so embarrassing!”

Dear Fresa, I don't understand what qualifies as embarrassing for you. Sincerely, me.

A Brief Intermission: Fresa's Nightly Thoughts

Hooray! Yaaaaay! I get to finally become an adventurer! Hmmm? What's this? I should be really happy, but my heart's not racing at all. I don't feel that rush of adrenaline. Hmmm, it's probably because so many things happened. My excitement surpassed my limits, maybe? I feel really calm, but I can't sleep anyway. Holmer-san's sound asleep in his sleeping bag in the corner though. He's sharing a room with a cute girl, and he still manages to completely pass out.

Hmmm. Fiiine, he seems tired anyways. I might as well leave him alone for now. In any case, I'm an adventurer now—an official guild member! Yaaaaay! Phew, I should calm down. I thought I'd be able to sleep if I let all my excitement out, but, like, I guess not. Better slow down nice and easy.

An adventurer. I've always wanted to be one, but I couldn't. Holmer-san was my acting guardian, and he was totally against it, since I was too weak to be an adventurer. First, I'm most compatible with fire magic, but I couldn't cast a single spell. I know that there are people like that, buuuut it's not like I don't have enough mana, and I was told that I could manipulate magic just fine. I practiced my chanting every day too. But I couldn't do it. It would've been better if I was accidentally misfiring, or if I just had bad aim or something. For whatever reason, my flame fizzles out in the middle of the spell. Holmer-san told me that was impossible.

I went to a friend who was also a magician for advice, and they told me to go to the doctor. Isn't that the worst advice ever? Between my mana and my skill at manipulating magic, people told me I was a genius all the time as a kid. So I decided to become a magician and an adventurer. I saved up as much money as I could, and bought a really expensive grimoire. I didn't expect my magic to just fizzle out like that! Every day, every time I chanted, my magic just fizzled.

I didn't know what else to do, and I didn't have any money, so I practiced my stick combat skills. Why a stick, you ask? 'Cause blades are expensive! Yeah, I knooow, the world isn't just gonna let me be an adventurer because I tried really hard. If I don't have the skills, I'll die in an instant. That's why Holmer-san never agreed to let me be an adventurer.

Hmmm. I didn't alwaaays follow his warnings, but there's still a line I don't cross, you know? He risked his life to protect me and my family. I'll

never forget what he said, with that stern expression, when he led us to safety. And I'll never break that promise with him. Whatever happens, I must never break that promise. My father, mother, brother, and I were betrayed by everyone, and yet Holmer-san never pushed us away. Now I'm the only one left, but he still never left my side, and he's still thinking about my family too. If he wasn't, he wouldn't have picked "Datil" as his new name.

Ack! Right! Yeah, yeah, that's right! Holmer-san's, like, young again! He's super good-looking! But for Apple-san's sake, I have to call him Datil from now on. I just have to talk to him like I used to, so it's really easy. Holmer—I mean, Datil. He's Datil now. He used to be all polite with me, so I'm sure he'll get used to it. We're just going back to the old days. Just like the old days...

Heh heh, I should be grateful to Apple-san. I'm a little sad that I can't actually use the apple magic, but still, I can finally, actually, really fight! It's this ability called King of Apples! I can call forth a lot of apples and put all sorts of effects on them! I have this other amazing ability too! Look! Look! I only grabbed this table a little, and I already dented it! ...Uh, wait, do I have to pay for this? Ugh, I just wanted to vent a little excitement, but now my mind is filled with questions. I can't sleep.

Oh, I know! Since I basically got power-ups, maybe I can use my spells now! Heh heh! I've gotta be able to! I gotta! Okay, I'll use my super special amazing magic! Uh, let me open a window here. Holm—I mean, Datil might wake up. Or maybe not. Wait, maybe it's okay. Yeah, if he wakes up, he wakes up! All right then!

Unknown traveler, remove the shackles of fire. Unleash the unseen, and return to ashes within the earth! Fire magic! I can feel it! The magic's flowing through my veins! Come on, flame of hell! Burn the heavens!

Fizzle.

Hmmm. Yeah, I can't sleep tonight.

Epilogue

After Fresa grinned to herself, mumbled under her breath, and wandered around the room aimlessly, she finally went to bed. I could hear her steady breathing.

“So she finally fell asleep,” Grida said.

She was probably just restless. She did wander around quite a bit, what with opening the window and making that fizzling sound and all.

“All right, then. Apple-san, I have a request.” Datil sidled up to me, next to the sleeping Fresa.

From an outsider’s perspective, talking to an apple makes you look insane.

“I would like for you to keep this request a secret.”

I knew it. You pretended to be asleep until you confirmed Fresa actually was. I thought it was weird since you didn’t tell Fresa the whole story either. What I heard between you and Pastèque was not what you told her.

“We’re going on a journey, right? This is about our funds.”

Figured. Sorry, I overheard this already. You told Fresa that Pastèque would lend us money, but I heard that...

“Apple-san, I want you to gather the belongings that Holmer left behind.”

The guildmaster’s bonus was for you to collect your belongings.

“Hmmm. Why is Datil-san asking you to do this?” Grida said.

Good question. If he were to just take his own stuff out of his room, it wouldn’t be a problem.

“Exactly. He should just go get it himself.”

But that won’t work here, Grida.

“Huh? Why?”

If Datil—the man formerly known as Holmer—goes to his old room, it’ll be deemed a “robbery.” Datil and Holmer are functionally different people.

“Oh, I see!”

If Datil gets apprehended while getting his stuff, it’ll be a huge problem. But if I were to go, I could just freeze in place. I doubt anyone would suspect an apple. I still have one question though.

“I need you to keep this a secret from Fresa. It’ll be bad if she finds out,” Datil said.

That’s my question. Why do you need to keep this a secret from her?

“You seem puzzled by what I said, but you’ll find out in due time.”

So you say. Well, I guess I’ll go for you. Also, how did you know that I was puzzled?

“I’m sorry for making you act like a burglar here. But I just don’t have the money right now to be able to go on a long trip.”

No need to apologize there. I don’t either. Besides, it’s my fault that you’re out of money. You threw away your fame, fortune, and identity as a rich Rank A adventurer to protect me. And this is pure speculation on my part, but Fresa probably doesn’t have money either. Honestly, I get the feeling that she and money are soon parted.

“Also, I don’t think Fresa has any money either,” he added.

Yeah, called it.

“You guys are kinda mean,” Grida said.

The fact that we also couldn’t sell any items we found in the Chasm of Catastrophe was a miscalculation on my part.

“Apple-san, this city of Kalabuya, as well as its four neighboring cities, are all under strict surveillance regarding item sales,” Datil said. “If we were to sell items of unknown origin, we’d immediately get arrested. The guildmaster told me himself, so I think this is true.”

Since a lot of people died in the Chasm, there’s gonna be “looters” around. Those are people that steal items off of corpses, or even kill other people and blame it on the monsters.

“That’s horrible! How awful!” Grida cried.

Yeah. These people might be more evil than the monsters, in a sense. That’s probably why the cities are strictly checking sales of items to catch those kinds of guys. They’re making sure that stolen or looted items aren’t turning any profit.

“I hope those bad guys get punished! I’m rooting for the surveillance team!”

Yeah, but thanks to that, we can’t sell anything now.

“Ack! That’s no good either!”

It goes without saying, but going on a journey is very costly. Even in Japan, where monsters and bandits don’t exist, the roads are paved with asphalt, and effective public transportation exists, you need quite a bit of cash to go on a trip.

Datil continued, “We absolutely need Holmer’s belongings and inheritance. Dead people don’t need items, and I don’t have any family. At this rate, the guild will collect it all. Please, Apple-san, go in my stead.”

Well, I don’t have a reason to refuse. The guy asking me is the one who owns the stuff in the first place, and it’s not like I’m stealing. Besides, he’s doing this for my sake. I rolled around Datil.

“Really? Thank you! There’s a few things I want you to keep in

mind though,” he said. “Pastèque said he’d pull some strings, so there shouldn’t be that many guards on the way there. The residents on either side of my room are off checking the situation at the Chasm, so they should be gone too, but the room itself has a pretty nasty safety mechanism.” He proceeded to explain the location of the traps in Holmer’s room, and how to deactivate them.

I don’t have any hands, so here’s hoping that shouldn’t matter.

“That’s how the traps work. You think you can do it, Apple-san?” Datil asked. We were in the middle of strategizing how I’d get to Holmer’s room and collect his belongings, so he was showing me a few schematics.

This might not be the smoothest method, but I’ll use my wind magic to carve a hole in the door and enter from there. I should be able to deactivate the traps in the room even without any of my limbs. I’ll just roll and bump into them.

“There’s a safe under the floorboards, but it might be tough to get at. You don’t have to collect this one if you can’t.”

The hidden safe does seem to be the trickiest, given how heavy it is. But it doesn’t seem to be nailed or glued down to anything, so I’ll just collect it, traps and all. I can have Datil take his time and deactivate those traps once I bring it back. Okay, let’s review the plan once more. I rolled around the diagrams that Datil drew for me, checking the areas where valuable items might be located. *Hm? Speaking of, what’s in this safe, anyway?* I rolled over the picture of the safe and slowly wavered from side to side.

Datil looked at me and cocked his head to one side. “Oh, do you want to know what’s inside?”

You get me. I rolled around the area as if to say “yes.”

“Inside that safe is a rock known as the Dragon’s Tear.”

Whoa! Just from the name, I can tell that it’s super important!

“Huh? But Datil-san said it was just a rock,” Grida chimed in.

No, he’s purposely saying that to hide its true value. When the time comes to reveal what the item truly is, it’ll blow us away! It’s a common technique!

“Wow! What an amazing technique!”

Be prepared, Grida, or you really will get blown away!

“Apple-san, you sure you’re not playing around with my words?” Datil asked.

No, of course not!

“Eh heh, of course not!” Grida added.

“Hmmm. All right, then. I’ll continue, shall I?” he said.

P-Please do. Phew, I feel like Datil’s catching on to our private

conversations.

“Yeah, he reminds me of Fresa-san a little,” Grida replied.

Datil looked at us quizzically, but continued his explanation.

“Adventurers have a rank. I’m sure you’re aware of this.”

Yep. Holmer was a Rank A. You and Fresa are Rank E.

“From Rank E to Rank A, completing requests and dealing with monsters will raise your rank. But it’s not easy to go above that—to become Rank S. Currently, there’s only four Rank S adventurers in the world.”

So few! But how does that relate to the Dragon’s Tear?

“To become Rank S, seven items must be gathered. They’re like trials.”

Oh, that makes sense.

“What do you mean, Furutsu?” said Grida.

The Dragon’s Tear is probably one of the seven items needed to reach Rank S.

“Seems like you’ve realized it already. Some of these are the Dragon’s Tear, the Devil’s Wings, the World Tree’s Leaf, and the Blood of the Phoenix. They’re all extremely difficult to obtain,” said Datil.

Whoa there! I don’t really get it, but they all sound like they’d be super rare in fantasy games. You’d probably get in trouble for throwing these away. Hm? Hmmm? WAAAAAIIIIIT!!!

“Ack?! What is it?” Grida said.

Grida, there was something amazing in that list!

“Huh?”

I didn’t think we’d have a lead this quickly!

“So, er, anyways, that safe just contains a carefully stored rock from the time that Holmer dreamed of becoming a Rank S adventurer. That’s all. Um, let me just say this again: that safe isn’t really the priority here, so you can leave it if you need to.”

Yep, roger that. I’ll take everything from that room, including Holmer’s old dream. This will be for your sake too, Grida.

“For my sake?”

Yeah. If Datil aims to reach Rank S, we might be able to claim our dream too.

In front of me was a huge building—the guild’s male dormitory.

It’s a lot more grand than I expected! How luxurious!

“Huh? Haven’t you been here before?” Grida asked.

Yeah. The day Fresa came back to this city, she went to Holmer’s room.

“Right? This building looks familiar to me.”

But she kept me in her pouch until we reached his room. I’ve never

seen this building with my own “eyes” before.

“Oh, right! I was the only one that could see!”

So, Grida, do you remember the way to Holmer’s room?

She giggled. “I do!”

Great! I was a little worried with just Datil’s diagram.

“But why is taking the Dragon’s Tear for my sake too?”

Oh, I guess I didn’t explain that. Remember when Datil was talking about the seven items needed to become a Rank S adventurer?

“Yeah. That thing was one of them.”

Yeah, and he listed a few other items. Among those, he said something about the “World Tree’s Leaf.”

“Ah!”

Heh, so if Datil aims to become a Rank S adventurer and we tag along to help gather the items, there’s a good chance we’d be able to meet the World Tree, right?

“Yeah! You’re right!”

But Datil is a Rank E adventurer now. If he loses the Dragon’s Tear too, he might give up on his dream entirely. It must’ve been pretty hard for him to get this.

“I see! That’s why we should bring that Tear back! You’re amazing! A genius!”

Ha ha, I know, right? All right then, let’s sneak our way in! Heh, I’ll steal everything I can.

As a male adventurer opened the door to the dorms, I rolled in.

Wait a sec. You know, I always imagined that at the end of a volume, I’d be on top of a hill with the blue sky above me, the sun beating down, as I said, “All right! Let’s start our journey!” or something.

“Furutsu?”

Yet here I am, sneaking around in the middle of night to steal items?! That’s wrong! I’ve never heard of anyone doing this!

“What’s wrong? Let’s sneak in and start stealing!”

See?! A heroine should never be like, “Let’s start stealing!” Wait, are we out of pages?! You can do it in the afterword or even in an ad! Just place me on a hill under the sunny blue skyyyyyyy!

Extra: The Forbidden Short Story: In the Heavens, the Melancholy of a Goddess

I knocked on the door, and a gruff voice replied, “Come in.”

Oof. The higher-ups have called me out again.

I opened the unnecessarily luxurious door and went inside to find a god in unnecessarily luxurious clothes. He was looking at me, his eyes narrowed.

Thank goodness, I’m not in front of a lot of people this time. Only my immediate supervisor’s here.

“I apologize for calling you here when you’re busy, but I had a few concerns. I was hoping you’d have an explanation for me.” He went to the mountain of documents on his desk, and pulled out three pieces of paper before lining them up in front of me.

Wow, he’s probably extremely busy too. Look at that mountain of documents. I shudder just thinking about filing those in his place.

“Reincarnator Number K001A-17262: Daisuke Furutsu. I have a few questions regarding him. You’re in charge of this person, correct?”

I knew it. It’s about those two.

“Yes, that is correct,” I replied.

“According to the documents, it seems you’ve specially given him five Cards of Fate.”

In general, all reincarnators get one card. Even under special circumstances, such as if the person in question is extremely virtuous, or if the world the person would reincarnate into specifically requests them, they would still only get two to three cards. Furutsu-san receiving five cards was an exceedingly rare case. It took a lot of work to get this approved.

“That is correct. I had gotten this approved as well. The approval number is—”

“Ah, no, I’m aware,” he said, cutting me off. “Your subordinate accidentally cut his life span short, was it? I think you handled this situation very well.”

“Thank you.” I really did feel bad about Furutsu-san. Offering him five Cards of Fate was the best I could’ve done.

“However.” My supervisor glanced down at the three documents and lowered his voice. “I heard that the storage card was among the

five he selected.”

Indeed, Furutsu-san was extremely lucky. All of his cards, excluding his fifth, were all very good. The storage card especially was very rare and could usually never be drawn. In general, a reincarnator will choose 1 card out of 100 before they're sent to their new world. The storage card is not included amongst those 100—it's the 101st.

“Once the owner of the storage card dies, it retains its contents and is shuffled back into the deck as the 101st card. The previous owner...died while killing the Demon Lord, it seems. They were a hero in their world, standing out from the common folk.”

That means the storage card didn't have an owner just as Furutsu-san was drawing his cards.

“Your report also states that a staff made from a World Tree was in there. Is this correct?” he asked.

“Yes.” I never expected a World Tree to be involved. No one keeps track of the items stored in the storage card. After all, we gods think that these are simply tools for mere humans.

“A World Tree should, quite frankly, never be brought into a different world. For safety reasons, this staff should've been destroyed.”

He was right, of course—a World Tree must always exist in a world, and support it and it alone.

“You may not know of this because you seem rather young, but a long time ago, we had a few World Trees meddle with each other. It resulted in the destruction of several hundred worlds.”

I'm well aware. While we don't know exactly why, a part of one World Tree entered its neighboring world.

“Luckily for us—ahem—but unfortunately for Furutsu, he has no limbs, and was reincarnated as an apple. As a result, he can't take anything out from the storage card. It would be ideal if this meant that we don't need to touch the World Tree, and the safest course as well. We all agreed on this. With all that in mind, I'd like to ask you: what in the world is going on with him?”

“What do you mean?” I replied. *Ugh, don't look at me like I'm playing dumb.* Of course I understand. Maybe I was a bit naive in thinking we'd be leaving them alone.

“I know you're busy, but the World Tree is extremely dangerous. If anything seems even a little off, I would like for you to report it immediately.”

“Of course. I'm also routinely checking up on the owner of the card, so I hope that puts your mind at ease.”

My supervisor let out a sigh, and placed a crystal ball on his desk. “Then I'll need you to explain this.”

The crystal ball is a convenient magical tool that turns red when it

detects a lie. From here on out, I'm being interrogated.

"Firstly, let's have a look at this record." An image appeared on the white wall. Luckily, that world is under a special spell and is closed off to outsiders, so records can only show still images. The gods' observation equipment cannot record any video there.

"Hm, this is rather inconvenient," he said.

I agree. In this case, Furutsu-san and Grida-chan are very lucky. On the gods' side, I'm probably the only one that directly observed them, and I pretended to look away for some incidents. The image on the wall was when Furutsu-san had just reincarnated, leaping high in the air as an apple. *What an amazing scene.*

"According to my records, Daisuke Furutsu was reincarnated as an apple. He was supposed to be dangling from a tree," he said.

Yep, that's what I reported. "That's correct."

"Then why is he leaping higher than the tree here?"

So you've noticed. You can make out a pea-sized tree underneath the apple here, so it's very easy to tell.

"A bird," I said.

"A bird?"

There's no turning back now. I'll just say whatever I was thinking back then. "I was actually away during this time. When I came back, the apple was already in this state. I had thought that perhaps a large bird tried to carry it away."

"I see..." he said, putting his chin on his hands.

He glanced at the crystal ball, which remained clear. That's actually what I'd assumed at the time.

"Very well. I had thought that Furutsu had managed to jump or something."

I chuckled. "That would be very interesting to see."

Impressive, he actually guessed correctly. How very interesting. Of course, I had sincerely thought this would be an interesting turn of events, so the crystal ball remained clear.

"Here's the next image." It showed a gush of flames emanating from Furutsu-san, from when he first learned magic.

This is bad—this is a really clean picture. Of course, apples can't talk. That means they can't chant spells, and shouldn't be able to use any magic. My, oh my, how should I explain this away?

"It looks like he's using magic here. He's gushing out flames."

Furutsu-san having the magician card won't be of any excuse here. The magician card simply allows the user to use all kinds of magic, and prevents them from being limited in that regard. There's no way it can do things like, say, allowing the user to learn a spell they're struck by, or enabling them to memorize magic just from a chant. Furutsu also mentioned announcements and bonuses coming from the Cards of

Fate, but that's odd too.

"Well? No use being silent. Explain this to me."

Whoops, seems like I was deep in thought there. I know Furutsu-san didn't do it on purpose, but I wish he'd been a bit more careful about his actions. He used a spell as soon as he learned it—wait a second! He didn't mean to learn the spell! I can explain this as is!

"Please look carefully. This flame is thanks to Fresa-san. She's in the image as well."

"Really?" My supervisor rubbed his eyes and took a good look at the image. He seemed a bit puzzled. "It doesn't look that way to me. Are you sure?"

"Yes, there's no mistaking this."

He glanced at the crystal ball, which remained clear, and rubbed his eyes again. He stared into my eyes and mumbled, "Seems like that's not a lie either."

Of course it's not. Furutsu-san was able to use magic after personally experiencing Fresa-san's magic. This flame was, in fact, thanks to her. As such, this wouldn't be a lie.

"Hmmm, it seems like I've been overthinking things. Here's the last image then." The picture switched to Furutsu-san in the Chasm of Catastrophe. He had used his blessing ability to make Holmer-san young again.

My, oh my. This even shows Holmer-san's teeth falling out.

"I have no idea what's happening here. What's going on? Didn't this man's body undergo sudden changes due to Furutsu?"

Well, this is it. I can't think of a good excuse here, so I'll just tell the truth. "Yes. Holmer-san ate Furutsu-san, which made his teeth fall out."

"I knew it! I knew something was up! Furutsu must have some sort of secret to him!" he said with a triumphant smile.

I'm planning on being truthful, but I'm not going to tell you Furutsu-san's secrets. "Sir, many humans bleed by simply biting into an apple. If their gums aren't in a healthy state, their teeth may naturally fall out. I believe that is the case here."

"Wh-What?! Are you sure?!"

If one doesn't take care of their teeth and gums, they may develop periodontitis.

I'm not lying here. Look, the crystal ball remains clear. "Yes, human teeth will always fall out very easily," I replied.

Again, this is the truth. After all, baby teeth fall out pretty easily and get replaced by permanent teeth.

"Oh, how pitiful. Humans are so very weak indeed," he said.

I'm sorry, it seems like I portrayed humans in a bad light here. But this god doesn't know the first thing about humans. It's as though he's not

interested in them at all.

“Hm, I see. So that’s how it is,” he finally said. He suddenly flashed a reluctant smile towards me, his eyes gazing deep into my soul.

Ack! Was he testing me this entire time?!

“Very well. Seems like there really aren’t any problems.”

What was that look for?! He didn’t see through me at all! Th-This is a bit too easy! I feel like that’s a different problem entirely, but I guess this is good for me.

“I apologize for taking your time. You may leave.”

Uh, I’m also sorry. Sorry for all sorts of things here. “Thank you. Excuse me.” I bowed before gently closing the door behind me. *Phew, I did it.*

Furutsu-san and company have obtained many amazing abilities. If they show off their skills like that again, I might not be able to cover for them next time.

I’m a little worried, but I’m the only one allowed to watch over them. I must work hard so that Furutsu-san and Grida-chan’s journey bears fruit. Eh heh, pun intended.

Afterword

It's nice to meet you! For those that know me, thank you for always checking my work out! I'm Gato!

Thank you so much for reading this book. It makes me very happy.

It's been about a year since I won the Grand Prize, the Novelist Award, at the 2nd Novel Up + Awards. It's been quite a while, but I believe this book will provide you with some sort of entertainment, even more so than the web version.

There were actually quite a few hurdles I had to overcome while writing *Reincarnated as an Apple*. I'd like to share a few stories.

As implied, the main character reincarnates as an apple. Reincarnating as a different species isn't all that unusual, and many writers before me have used this idea. However, the heroine is also a staff, meaning that neither of the main characters are human. The cover's illustration, then, would be just an apple and a staff, making it look very odd. To tell you the truth, even I occasionally wondered, "Am I screwed?" during the whole thing.

("Then why did you use the same idea twice?" might be an accurate question to ask here.)

However! Two people saved me: my editors A and S (order doesn't matter). They took my work in their hands and told me, "This is fine. We'll make this into a good book!" I almost cried when I heard them say that. I wasn't even at the starting line—I was in the waiting room before that, and yet they still patted me on the shoulders as if to tell me, "Let's run this together!" I'm honestly shocked and I think they're a little insane. I mean—*ahem, ahem*—apologies, I admire their drive as they gave me confidence and strength to see this work through. I'd like to personally thank them here.

I'd also like to thank Itsuki Mito, who provided wonderful illustrations to this odd and difficult-to-grasp book. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Without your illustrations, I doubt this book would even exist. Thank you so much.

To all the people involved with making this story into a physical book: This was my first attempt at something like this. I didn't know a single thing, and yet you all patiently worked with me. Thank you so much.

Thank you also to everyone who cheered for me on the light novel

website, Novel Up + . Thank you to those that gave me direction and sound advice. I will never forget the kindness that you all have shown me.

Furutsu-san and Grida-chan's journey is just beginning. I'll try my best so that everyone can tag along until the end. Thank you very much.



My fireball
penetrated the
scarecrow at a
frightening speed
and the brick wall
behind sported a
huge new hole.
That was just
three percent of
its full power.

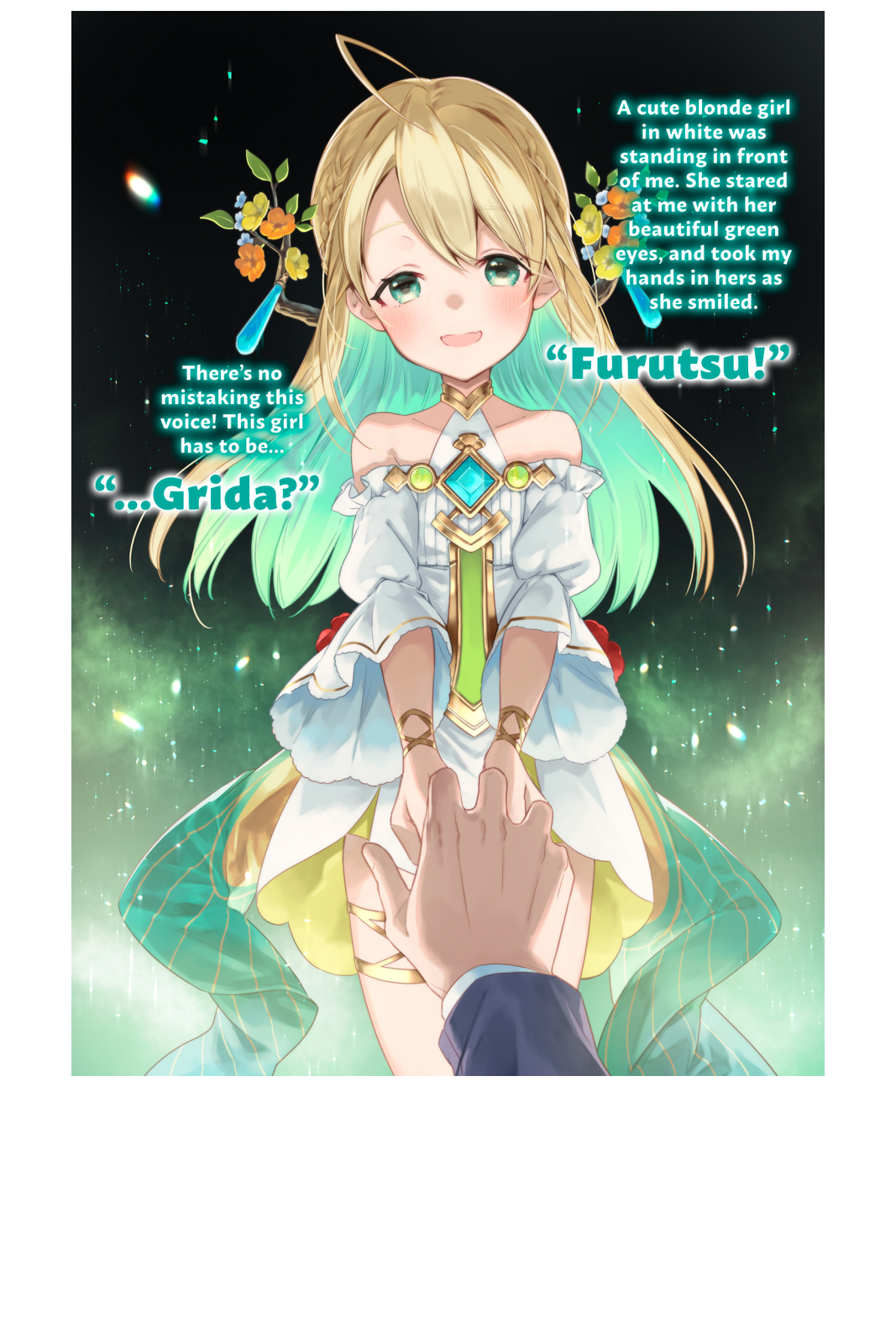
Suddenly,
everything
went red.

“Whaaat?!
I did it!
I fired a
spell!”

Reincarnated as an
APPLE:
This Forbidden Fruit is forever
Unblemished!

1





A cute blonde girl
in white was
standing in front
of me. She stared
at me with her
beautiful green
eyes, and took my
hands in hers as
she smiled.

“Furutsu!”

There's no
mistaking this
voice! This girl
has to be...

“...Grida?”











Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

Copyright

Reincarnated as an Apple: This Forbidden Fruit Is Forever
Unblemished! Volume 1
by Gato

Translated by piyo
Edited by Danny Miles

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2021 Gato

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Hobby Japan
This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby
Japan, Tokyo
English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: November 2022
Premium E-Book